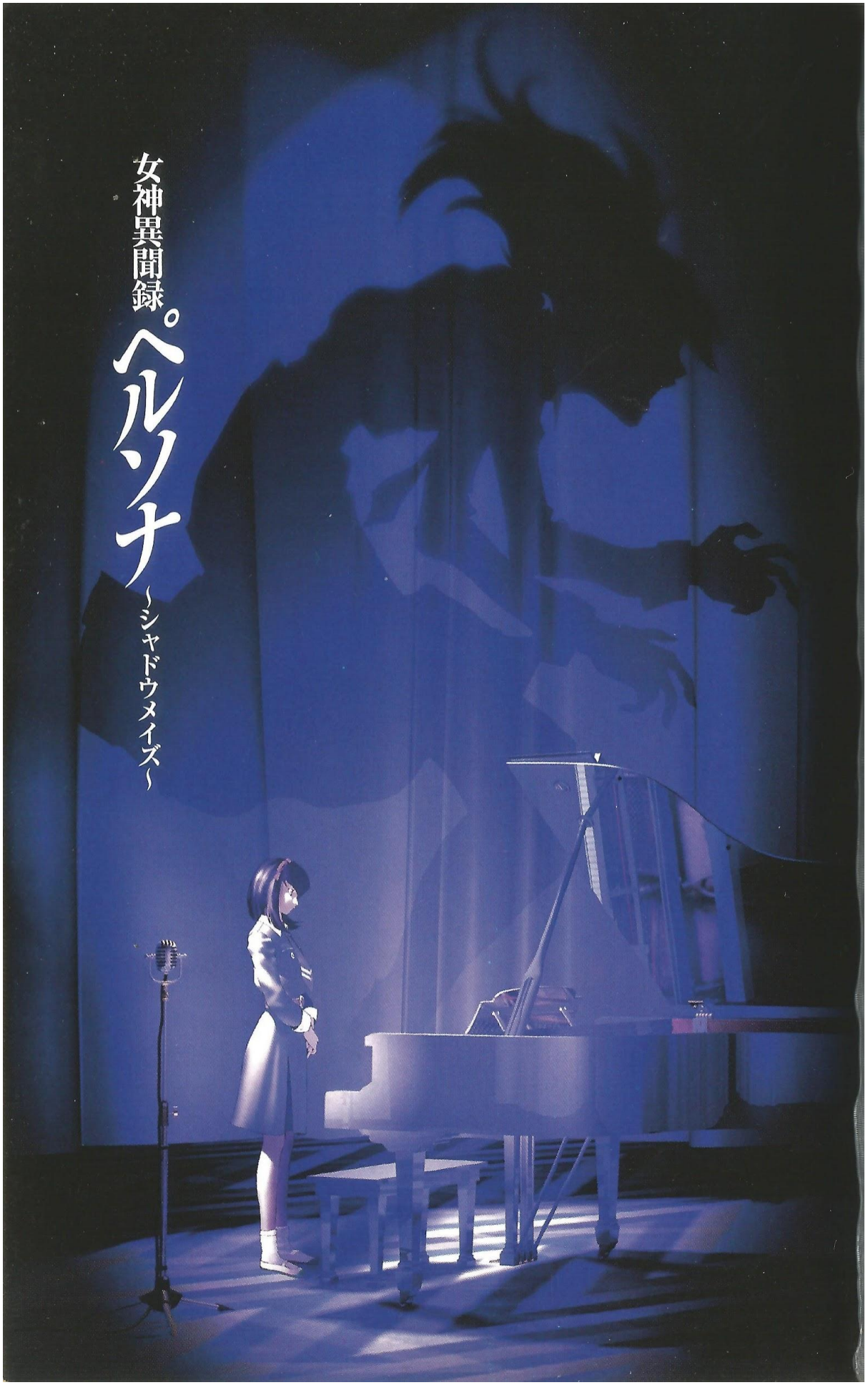
女神異聞録。ペルソナ
～シャドウメイズ～

MEGAMI IBUNROKU PERSONA ～SHADOW MAZE～
ALTERNATE TALE OF THE GODDESS: PERSONA ～SHADOW MAZE～

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Published By: Aspect Novels
Release Date: May 4, 1997

Translation: Gabriulio

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In the shadowless room

Just what exactly is there about hospitals that make them so depressing?

My hospital room is on the third floor, with a window facing the south from which sunlight enters. The room is colored in pastels: the walls are ivory, the floor is a warm cream, and the curtains a pale pink.

At first glance, it looks like a bright and clean room, but a hospital room is a hospital room regardless. The bright shades of the walls, floor, and curtains have become ingrained with the smell of disease. I'm not talking about the smell of cleaning products or medicine, that's something else.

I truly believe that hospitals *reek of illness*.

This smell has been ingrained into my body as well, and it won't go away.

Even after I'm released from this room, no matter how much fun I'm having, this *stench* will never leave me. It will always remind me that I'm a different kind of human being than healthy people. And that's why I've always spent my time alone and quiet. It's because I don't want the special treatment that normal people always give me.

The happiest memories of my childhood are from when I was drawing pictures of my dream world in my sketchbook. Other people would, sometimes, acknowledge and praise the dreams I sketched on paper. I got into many art contests via recommendations, and even won some awards.

But for me, that didn't matter. I just wanted to dream.

In my own world, I was always happy. In my dream world, I was able to live a happy life in a beautiful colorful city, always surrounded by kind people.

As I sought to immerse myself more in my dream world, it became more vivid and beautiful. On the other hand, the real world became more and more faded, as if I were looking at it via sepia-toned lenses.

That irritating, gloomy stench of illness from the sepia-toned real world couldn't affect me in my dream world. And so, I started to concern myself only with the dream world. My

thoughts shaped the dream world, while my dreams simultaneously became the source of my power.

Inside my dreams, there was a *Paradise*. A *Paradise* for me only. Only I and the people I've created could enter it.

Until that day. The day that man came and something changed.

From that day onwards, my dream - my Paradise - started, little by little, to change its orbit.

My dream… my Paradise… where in the world are they moving towards?

Incident ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

Feeling like someone was shaking me awake, I opened my eyes. My vision is still blurry… It seems I fell asleep without realizing it.

For some reason, I had a strange dream. In my dream, I was feeling very anxious and asking for help… but I just can't remember *why* I was feeling that way.

I raised my face and looked around. I'm in a classroom, and judging from the sunlight entering from the window and dyeing the room in red hues, it was after school hours. I'm sitting on my desk in the middle of the classroom and it seems I was asleep face down on it.

Soon, my thoughts become clear and I get angry.

Dammit, Naito! He said "I'm dropping by the library really quick, so wait for me" and so I did, but it's already sunset! Don't make people wait for you, geez!

"Humph! I'm going home!"

Having said so out loud, I rose vigorously from the chair. But as I grabbed my bag and exited the classroom, a chill runs down my spine. The school building seems weird. It's awfully quiet and I don't feel a single person's presence.

The sun might already be setting, but it's still only five o'clock. Normally at this hour it's still possible to hear the voices of the members of the athletic clubs training on the school grounds. But there is not even a single student in detention or teacher working overtime.

The building itself seems weird too.

Have the walls always been this pale? I could swear both the walls and the floor seemed brighter this morning.

Ah, there's a piece of old chewing gum stuck on the floor. That definitely wasn't there this morning!

Have the posters for the sports festival on the bulletin board always been this lame? I could've sworn they looked different.

Wait, could it be…? That *girl in black* must've done something again!

If that's the case, then Naito…

With sudden dread, I ran down the hallway.

I have to find him. I have to make sure nothing happened to him. If that girl in black hurt him, I'll make her regret it!

Naito is the boyfriend of my best friend Chisato and a very good friend of mine. Although nowadays we're more like "comrades in arms" than anything else.

Around one month ago, a *wall* suddenly appeared in the middle of the city, cutting it in half. Ever since then, this girl in black who is able to control "demons" started coming to St. Hermelin High School to torment the students. Whenever that happens, Naito and I work together to protect everyone in the school.

Last week, Chisato was kidnapped by that girl in black, which really put Naito and me down. We plan on rescuing Chisato, but it seems like she was taken to the other side of the wall, so we've been looking for clues on how to cross it. Naito has been desperately reading as many books as he can looking for one.

He's so dedicated to Chisato, it honestly makes me feel a little jealous.

Anyway, I headed to the library on the third floor of the school building, but the door is locked and I can't get in. I can hear someone inside, so I tried calling them.

"Hey, is anyone in there? Are you in there, Naito?"

"W-W-What? Who's there!? There's no Naito in here! Anyway, who are *you*? Go away!"

Wow, this person is pretty rude.

"Please open the door. It's me, Maki Sonomura."

"Sonomura? Sonomura from the second year?"

"Yes, that's me!"

"There's no way you're her! Sonomura and Naito aren't supposed to be in the school! Ah… you're a demon, aren't you!? Y-You won't trick me that easily! Go away!"

What's this person talking about? Me, a demon?

And what does he mean by Naito and I not being supposed to be in the school? What was *that* about?

"I am *not* a demon!"

"A-And I already told you to go away!"

The person on the other side was panicking so hard I honestly felt sorry for them and gave up on arguing. What a strange fella… I guess there *are* people like that in this school.

Walking around, I ran into other students in the hallways but they reacted the same way as the library guy. When they weren't panicking that "demons have invaded the city!" they'd tell me "Naito? The guy who went missing two months ago?"

At first I thought the girl in black was up to her old tricks, but I don't know what's happening anymore.

Strangely enough, there was a student I didn't recognize at all.

I bumped into him in the hallway, but when I tried apologizing he was already walking away. He was very tall, with a scar on his forehead, and he didn't say a single word. I know the faces of every single student in this school, even the people from different grades, so that was strange. Maybe he is a new transfer student I haven't heard about yet.

In the end, I didn't find Naito inside the school, so I tried the courtyard but the front door was blocked and couldn't be opened. All that's left are the gym and the clubrooms.

I was on my way to the gymnasium and opened the door to the access that connects it to the school building. Inside the narrow passage there is an incinerator, and right next to it are the familiar faces of some of my classmates.

There's Suzakuin, a guy of few words, and Inaba, the resident chatterbox. Also Kirishima, the super serious honor student from Tohoku[1], and Yuka Ayase, a party-girl *kogal*[2] whom even the teachers have given up on setting straight. There's also Yuko Himeno, a member of the art club. She's very rich and boastful so most people don't like her, but Yuko is actually a really nice girl underneath it all.

They are all dear friends of mine whom I always have fun with.

Surprisingly, Nanjo was with them. That guy is normally always by himself, grumping.

Naito is not with them though, but this weird-ass school was already starting to creep me out, so seeing so many of my friends together is rather relieving.

"Oh, so this is where you guys were! Hi everyone, whatcha doing?"

I called out to my friends with a smile, and they all turned around simultaneously with surprised looks, which quickly morphed into confusion once they saw my face.

Yuka took a step back, her back now directly to the wall. She was fidgeting, as if she wanted to run away.

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[1] The northeastern portion of Honshu (the largest island of the Japanese archipelago).
[2] Japanese fashion trend characterized by short skirts and loose socks, as well as materialism.

“Geez, what’s with this reaction?”

I walked over to them and clapped Inaba on the shoulder. He just stared at me, mouth hanging open.

“Seriously guys, what’s with the staring? Oh, are you all charmed by my looks? Don’t worry, I get it that I am *super* cute. Hmm-hmm!”

“H-Hey, are you the real Sonomura?”

“Of course it’s me. Everyone’s dearest, the one and only Maki! C’mon, Inaba, stop with the bad jokes.”

I laughed and gave Inaba’s shoulder a fierce slap. This made him stagger and bump into Suzakuin, who was standing next to him.

“H-Hey, Jay, isn’t she acting a little weird? And wasn’t she supposed to be in the hospital? What do you think?”

“I dunno, man. Don’t ask me that.”

They were whispering about me even though I can see and hear them perfectly. Sheesh, why is Inaba always so tactless!

I shoved them aside. Nanjo at least always has a level head, so I might as well try my chances with him.

“Hey, Nanjo, have you seen Naito?”

“Naito? He disappeared two months ago and there hasn’t been any sign of him. You might have been hospitalized but surely you heard of it, didn’t you, Sonomura?” Nanjo said that calmly as he raised one eyebrow.

“Not you too, Nanjo! Stop with the bad jokes!”

Kirishima then butted into the conversation.

“Oh, yes, there’s a matter more imperative than Naito’s whereabouts! *Maki*,[3] your mother has been hurt! We transported your progenitor here and she is now being treated in the nurse’s office. Don’t you perhaps think that staying by your mother’s side is a more pressing issue right now?”

E-Excuse me? Since when was Kirishima this formal?[4]

[3] Elly uses roman script instead of Japanese ideograms when she says people’s names or when she says something in English. The different font is meant to represent that.

[4] Eriko speaks in an extremely formal variant of Japanese.

“Even you’re making fun of me, Kirishima? Didn’t I tell you before that I don’t have a mom!? And you can go back to speaking normally, please. Something happened at school, didn’t it? This isn’t the time to be joking around.”

They all looked at each other, clearly taken aback.

“Anyway, we don’t have time to waste here. We have to pay SEBEC a visit.”

“Is that Kandori guy really in there, though?”

“He must be. According to what Sonomura’s mother told us, that place was ground zero of this incident. And that guy, Takahisa Kandori, is right in the middle of it.”

I’m physically standing right next to my friends, but mentally I’m as far from their conversation as humanly possible. Just who or what are these “SEBEC” and “Kandori?” I never heard of them.

Huh…?

But… something about this makes me feel uneasy.

I *think* I never heard those words before. But even so, I feel like I remember them from somewhere. Like I know what they mean.

I wonder where… a dream, maybe?

My mind kept running in circles, and as it did my gaze wandered. By happenstance, it crossed with Yuka’s.

Standing with her back to the wall, she’s looking at me with the same face she makes when looking at a demon. And right on the wall, there’s a hole big enough for someone to go through. I don’t remember seeing it today morning, though.

“Hey, when did they open that hole on the wall?”

“It was, like, way back. Why don’t ya know about it? Are you really Sonomura, huh?”

Yuka is glaring at me with venom in her eyes. Why is she treating me like this?

“Sheesh, Ayase! Give Sonomura a break, will ya? She just got out of the hospital, it’s only natural she doesn’t know ‘bout the hole on the wall.”

Inaba placed himself between Yuka and I.

“She’s being shady as hell! Forget not knowing about the hole in the wall, she said a bunch of other weird stuff too. She’s not acting normal, I bet she’s a demon in disguise!”

“What!? Hey, there are some things you just can’t say! Only a monster would accuse their friends of being a demon!”

“I’m not a demon, monkey boy!”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about!”

They looked about to start brawling at any second, so I immediately tried to intervene.

“Stop it, you two. You don’t have to fight because of me.”

As I grabbed Yuka’s arm, she violently shook me off. I stumble and the momentum makes the compact I keep in my skirt’s pocket fall off, rolling on the ground before stopping by Yuko Himeno’s feet.

“Ah, this is…”

Timidly, Yuko bends down and picks up the compact.

“I-I think she is the real Sonomura. She really treasures this compact, you see. She would never part with it…” Yuko says with an unusual nervous voice, the compact now resting on the palm of her hand. Suzakuin then reached his hand and picked it up.

“Yep, this is Sonomura’s compact alright. Which means this Sonomura is the real deal. Case closed.”

Suzakuin returns the compact to me after looking it over.

“Thank you, Suzakuin.”

I’m happy that Suzakuin could tell I’m not a fake, so I smiled at him. However, he returned my gaze with a scowl.

Huh? What did I do?

“Didn’t I tell you before not to call me that?”

“Eh, You did? But why?”

“Just call me by my name, geez!”

“This dude here has got a big complex over his surname,” Inaba said.

“Ah, is that so? But it’s such a nice surname though. Let’s see… your first name is Jihei, right?”

“Sonomura, the next time you call me Jihei I’m not going to be held accountable for what I do. It’s Jay! *J-A-Y*!”

“But what’s wrong with Jihei? I think it suits you.”

“Argh! It was Jay in the first place! They forced me to change it into that Japanese name!”

“Can we go a single conversation without you bringing up the fact that you’re a *hafu*[5]?” Inaba yelled. “And how can you even tell that compact really belongs to Sonomura? You never mentioned anything like that before!”

[5] Someone of half-Japanese ethnic origin. The term originates from the English word “half.”

"I never said anything because there wasn't *anything* to say. Sonomura lost her compact last year and she was turning the school upside down looking for it. I just happened to pass by where it was and picked it up. That's all there is to remember. Only that. No need to get all hot and bothered. You always do that when Sonomura is concerned."

"W-W-W-Who's hot and bothered!? Shuddup, dumbass!"

I lost my compact sometime during last year? Even after hearing Jay's account, I have no memory of it. Even so, he went out of his way to confirm I wasn't a demon, so telling him I don't remember that incident would be a bit too insensitive.

"Anyway, it seems like you guys know more about whatever's going on than I do. Can you please tell me everything you know? I could really appreciate a pick-me-up."

Nanjo pushed Inaba and Jay, who were busy still bickering, away and leaned forward.

"Very well. Your recovery may have been going steadily, but you were still hospitalized in the first place. Not to mention you *were* just moved to the ICU due to that sudden decrease in your vitals, so it's no wonder you're feeling a little disoriented. Well then, let me explain everything to you."

Nanjo then gave me a brief summary of the events up until now.

"Everything began with that game called *Master Persona*, which has become popular in this school recently. Well, it is rather similar to the more well-known *Kokkuri*[6]. Once summoned, the so-called Master Persona is able to tell your future and cause other supernatural phenomena.

"Ayase and Uesugi were firm believers, while I thought it was all nonsense. Even so, we did the ritual and the Master Persona truly appeared before us, albeit in the form of a little girl wearing a white dress. She then proceeded to knock us all out with some sort of lightning power. While unconscious, I dreamed of meeting a mysterious person calling themself Philemon, and the others later attested to having the same dream. We woke up in the infirmary, and Ms. Saeko ordered us to go for a complete check-up in the Mikage General Hospital just in case."

Jay then forced his way in the story.

[6] A Japanese game popular during the Meiji period and also a form of divination. The name refers to the game itself, the actual physical apparatus used, as well as the spirit believed to possess the apparatus.

“Then Inaba started making a fuss over how we should visit you, since you were in the same hospital. Well, Ms. Saeko also asked us to do it anyway, but this son of a bitch here wouldn’t shut up about it. He even made a commotion because he wanted to make a detour to your room before our check-ups.”

“Hey! I never said that!”

“Yes, you did. Don’t try to lie your way out of this.”

“Shut up, *Jihei*!”

“So eager to die today, aren’t you, Inaba?”

Jay and Inaba started arguing again. Since when have those two been like this, bickering with each other like little kids? And were they always this rude? Also, they’re talking about visiting me in the hospital, but I don’t remember ever being hospitalized in my entire life.

And where is this Mikage General Hospital anyway? I have no idea. I want to ask, but I decided to keep quiet for now.

“If you want to fight, do it elsewhere! Be silent!” Nanjo silenced the two before he resumed his story.

“During our visit, your condition worsened and you were taken to the ICU. Immediately thereafter, the *incident* happened. As for the specifics of what happened, we don’t know for certain. A great earthquake occurred, and the hospital’s structure was changed as well.

The hospital’s internal structure became like a maze, and strange life forms one could appropriately call demons started wandering the halls, attacking both patients and hospital staff. The ICU you were in also disappeared in the maze. I assumed the worst, and the fact that you’ve managed to return to the school safely is almost a miracle by itself. We also escaped from the hospital, but Yamaoka…”

Nanjo suddenly stopped talking. For a while he just stood there, clenching his fists tightly and staring into nothing. I could tell he was full of anger, and the look on his eyes scared me.

“Nanjo…?”

“No, it’s nothing. On our way back to school in the demon-infested city, we helped your mother, who was being chased by SEBEC employees. Being a researcher working for the company, she told us that the incident was caused by the president of the Mikage-cho branch, Kandori.”

“So basically, we’re going to SEBEC to kick the ass of that Kandori guy. To tell you the truth, I still can’t believe something like this is going on… But hey, Nanjo, wasn’t that

explanation way too long-winded? Won't you run out of words and end up with an empty head?"

"Inaba, you can rest assured that it won't happen. My brain is on a *completely* different scale than yours."

"Tch, like I care!"

While Inaba made a fuss, I thought about what they just told me.

It seems like the girl in black has nothing to do with whatever this is, but demons *did* appear and the whole city is in danger. Naito also disappeared and everyone says that he's "missing." If this is because of this so-called "incident," and the one behind it is this Kandori from SEBEC then there's only one thing to do…

"Okay, then let's go! Let's see, the front door is blocked so we need another exit. And would you look at that, the hole in the wall is big enough for us to pass through!"

I started climbing the hole in the wall, but Kirishima hurriedly pulled me back by my hand.

"Wait, *Maki*! Where do you think you're going? As you just heard, the city is full of *demons*. That's the reason why the entrance has been closed."

"And *that's* why we're going to stop Kandori, right?"

"What? You want to come with us? No way! Don't even joke about that, please! Just leave it to us and stay here with your mother." Inaba's voice was hysterical.

"I already told you I don't have a mother. Plus, it's *my* body so I can go wherever I want with it and you can't stop me. If I said I'm going, then I'm going!"

"Sonomura, please stop acting like a spoiled child at your age. What will you do if your condition worsens again?"

Inaba was looking at my face with worry.

"I'm perfectly fine! I said I'm going, then I'm *going*!"

I looked back straight into Inaba's eyes. For some reason, his face reddened and he looked away.

"Jay, Nanjo! Say something!"

"I'm okay with it. She said she's going, and she seems healthy enough. Plus, we'll be safer in larger groups. Let's go, Sonomura."

"Jay, you irresponsible little… Nanjo, say something!"

“If the person in question says so, then there’s nothing we can do. Sonomura isn’t a child, she can make her own choices and take responsibility for them. Furthermore, she is more dependable than you, Inaba.”

Nanjo then promptly started climbing through the hole.

“It’s settled then!”

I follow Nanjo’s lead.

I can still hear Inaba making a fuss. Sheesh, how stubborn can he be!?

“Ah, Jay! You go after Sonomura. I’ll… uh... wait a little longer.”

“What are you dilly-dallying for? Just go already, man.”

“I can’t! If I go now, I might see her panties!”

“Huh…? *That’s* your hangup, you dumbass? But you want to see them, don’t you?”

“N-No, I don’t!”

What the hell are they talking about…?

“Everyone, please *be careful*! You can leave the protection of this educational institution in our hands!”

I could, however, clearly hear Kirishima’s words of encouragement.

Just wait for us, everyone in the school! We’ll have this solved as soon as possible.

Just as Nanjo said earlier, the city is completely desolated.

One of the street signs had its pole somehow bent in a screw shape, which should be normally impossible. And right next to it lies an abandoned car with its front completely smashed and billowing smoke rising from the motor. On the sidewalk there are many burn marks and various things abandoned on the ground like bags and shoes, probably left behind by people who ran away in a hurry. The very air was darkened by a faint haze and sometimes the sound of a scream, an impact, and many other unpleasant noises could be heard in the distance.

Walking through the streets, the first thing that comes to my mind is sadness over things becoming like this.

But still, the city is... without a doubt, *strange*. And I’m not talking about its current state, either. I mean, I have never heard of this “Abandoned Factory” we’re heading off to right now.

According to the guys, there is a hidden passage to the SEBEC Building in there. They were told about it by a woman calling herself “my mother,” who also gave them the security card needed to open it.

When I asked where the factory is, they told me you have to walk in a straight line from the south side of the school for five blocks. In other words, as we are right now we only need to keep going straight.

But that’s weird. If we keep going ahead, we’ll run into the wall that splits the city in half. How come they haven’t realized it yet? Absolutely everyone knows about it. And that’s yet another point in the list of strange things. Not knowing about the wall is just unthinkable. Heck, it’s been so long since it appeared that we’ve already grown used to not being able to cross to the other side.

There’s a rumor that you can reach the other side via the subway, but there is also a powerful “evil being” living there who attacks anyone who passes by. If the Abandoned Factory really is where I’ve been told, then we cannot go there with Mikage-cho the way it is.

And right then, a thought crossed my mind.

It was crazy, but not *impossible*, so I decided to share it with everyone.

“Hey, Inaba…”

I spoke to Inaba, who was walking right in front of me.

“Hmm?”

After turning around to look at me, his expression froze for a second.

“S-Sonomura!”

Inaba’s shout overlapped with an eerie growl.

I turned in the direction of the sound, and saw a *demon*.

Its form was that of a human-faced giant bird looking down on me from a few meters above the ground. As it opened its mouth wide, a putrid smell spread through the air, making me start coughing violently.

My eyes hurt. It’s as if they’re being gouged by burning fire tongs.

Up till now, I’ve fought many demons controlled by the girl in black.

Although we call them “demons,” they’re much smaller than this thing and they look like bright multi-colored children toys. They’re also easy to fight against and destroy as long as you have some sort of weapon.

But the one in front of me right now is on a whole different level!

“Sonomura! Quick, come here!”

Even though I can hear them, it’s no use. Even though I’m trying to run, my limbs are numb and won’t move. It must be because of that smell. The demon flaps its wings creating a gust that makes me collapse on the ground.

The putrid smell becomes thicker, and by now I can’t even breathe. With my eyes blocked by dust and tears, I can’t see anything. Everyone’s voices are also becoming more faint and distant.

Am I going to die? In a place like this?

Am I going to be killed and eaten by this monster!?

No… I don’t want that. I’m too young to die!

I summon the last of my strength. At that time, a voice starts calling my name. It’s very faint at first, but its volume increases gradually until it starts to echo loudly in my head.

“Who are you!? Can’t you see that I’m busy over here!? Stop yelling at me, go bother someone else!”

...is what I wanted to say, but couldn’t. My whole body was paralyzed, and so I couldn’t even move my lips. Even so, the owner of the voice answered.

“*I am the one who has answered thine call. I am the goddess who controls the spring of life. As one who has been lying dormant inside of thee since time immemorial, I’ve responded to thine summons as it is time for me to grant thee strength. I shall save thee.*”

A voice resembling a solemn bell echoed in my head.

At that moment, I felt something *come out* of myself.

No… “was born” would be more correct.

From the depths of the depths of my mind, pushing away the several layers of memories and thoughts, a being of power, warmth and light manifested itself in the outside world.

After that, I don’t know very well what happened. What I remember is a warm wave of *power* flowing into every corner of my body and a strong flash that reached even my closed eyelids, followed by an earth-splitting death cry.

When my vision gradually returned, I saw everyone kneeling around me in a circle, their faces filled with worry.

“Huh… what? What happened!?”

Hoping for an answer, I shouted that right after regaining my breath.

“Persona…”

That one word was Jay’s response.

“That was a Persona, Sonomura.”

“Huh? What? You guys know what that was!? What is this Persona thing about?”

Rather than answering my question himself, Jay looked at Nanjo worriedly, who then took over the explanation.

“We don’t know for certain if ‘Persona’ really is the correct name, but out of convenience we are calling them that. Consequently, each of us has their own Persona. Personally, I believe they represent another self that resides in the depths of our minds, and that’s due to this incident that they’re able to manifest.

The demons wandering the town might be the manifestations of the lingering evil thoughts within the citizens’ minds. I believe that would make sense. However, I never expected you to become a Persona-user…”

“So, in short… they’re the gods and demons living inside people’s minds manifesting into reality?”

“In layman’s terms, yes.”

Nanjo said all of that as if he was talking about the weather, but it was a big shock for me.

All this time, there was a “god” inside of me watching over everyone from afar, ready to lend me her power when the need arose.

There’s a god living inside me… if that’s not encouraging, I don’t know what is.

Wait a second. Just now I said that there are gods *and* demons living inside people’s minds. Gods aside, demons don’t ring a bell to me. There are no demons inside of me. Living happily, wanting to protect the school… feelings like that can’t give birth to demons, and not once have I ever felt anything that could be described as demonic.

I mean, a demon is… well, a demon! It’s a *thing* that comes from god-knows-where to cause misfortune for people and must be driven away. This kind of thing has nothing to do with me. Nanjo’s speech about there being demons inside people’s hearts is just plain weird.

“Hey, Sonomura?”

Jay’s call snapped me out of my train of thought. He was looking at me worriedly.

“I was pretty surprised too, at first. God, Persona, whatever this is, I’ll use it as long as it helps us. You shouldn’t overthink it.”

“Thanks for worrying, but I’m alright.”

I nodded and got up from the ground in one go.

“Hey, don’t get up so suddenly like that. Are you feeling okay? Don’t you want to rest for a bit?”

Inaba sounds really shaken.

“I told you I’m fine!”

And I mean it. I’m feeling full of energy. Why is he treating me like I’m made of glass?

Inaba sighed and... hit Jay over the head?

Excuse me? What the hell?

“Ow! That hurts, asshole. Why did you hit me?”

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t see you there.”

“You were looking right at me, dumbass.”

Before the two of them started fighting, Nanjo started walking away. I quickly followed him and after a few seconds Jay and Inaba sprinted to join us.

Many minutes later, we finally arrived at the Abandoned Factory. It is the filthiest building I’ve ever seen. It’s built out of metal plates, dim, stinks like oil, is way too spacious, and the floor is covered in scraps and pieces of many machines.

The instant I saw the Abandoned Factory, I became convinced that this is not my world. Well, there’s just no way such a dirty and old building would exist in my city.

“This is a rather filthy place…”

Nanjo’s words were nothing more than a whisper, but I’m behind him one hundred percent!

“Hey, Nanjo! Don’t badmouth our atelier!”

Inaba then flipped the light switch, illuminating the place. At that moment, my breath was taken away by what I saw. The walls of the factory were covered in graffiti art that we couldn’t see before. The colors were all very vivid and their impact was almost palpable.

“Did you paint these yourself…?”

“Oh, that’s right… this is the first time you’re seeing my art, isn’t it? Well, this place here doubles as a dance studio and atelier for me and my buds, the Tailors.”

Inaba looked at the graffiti proudly.

It’s mostly done in primary colors, and the vividness is really uplifting. I can feel the warmth and the spirit of the artist through it.

“Wow, this is amazing! I always thought you were just a class clown, but you do have things you’re good at!”

I was being earnest, but for some reason Inaba looked ready to cry?

“Sonomura… you really are acting strange, aren’t you?”

But Inaba’s whimpers were muffled by Jay’s shout, which echoed through the factory.

“Hey, I think I found it! This is the slot for the security card, isn’t it?”

“Very good, Jay. I knew you were more a reliable companion than Inaba.”

Inaba was visibly angry at Nanjo’s words.

“Shuddup! It doesn’t matter who found the damn thing. Jay, hurry up and use the card!”

“Wait, Inaba. We don’t know what might happen, so we must think before…”

“Stop being such a killjoy, Nanjo. Heck, I’ll do it myself!”

Inaba jumps up the three-step iron staircase to where Jay is, taking the security card from his hands.

“Wait, Inaba!”

“Here we go!”

Ignoring Nanjo’s pleas to stop, Inaba inserted the card in a gap in the wall around his eye-level. With a thunk, the ground started shaking, and a gaping hole was opened on the ground just a few centimeters away from where Nanjo was. From the dark depths of the square-shaped hole in the ground, a lift surrounded by an iron fence rose.

“Inaba, you complete idiot! Are you trying to kill me!?”

“Ah, sorry, my bad. Tch, guess it won’t be that easy…”

“What was that!?”

“A joke, a joke! It’s a j-o-k-e!”

“What kind of imbecile jokes about *murdering* someone!?”

“Hey, Nanjo… I just realized something…”

Jay, who had silently made his way next to the lift while Nanjo and Inaba were arguing, spoke to the former.

“What is it, Jay!?”

“The SEBEC goons must’ve used this ridiculously big and noisy thing before, right?”

“Yes! So what!?”

“Inaba says he uses this place as a studio, but never noticed anything…”

Jay and Nanjo exchanged glances for a second before turning to Inaba. They then began to point and laugh at him wholeheartedly.

“Oh my God, what an idiot!”

“You truly are naught but a simpleton!”

“S-Shut up…! An artist only cares about art! Sonomura, let’s leave those idiots behind and go ahead!”

Inaba said that and embarked on the lift.

Interlude ～black paradise～

On that day, I was waiting for daddy to come to my castle, just like always.

It was long past our usual meeting time, but daddy wasn't here yet. That's why I went to pick him up, thinking that he may have gotten lost on his way here.

The passage daddy always takes is a little unstable. It's no problem for me to pass through, but it's not the same for daddy so sometimes he takes the wrong path by accident. But I love my daddy, so whenever that happens, I always rescue him.

I took the passage to daddy's world, but daddy is speaking with some weird people in his office. It looks important, so I decided to watch them from behind the door. It looks like they're having a fight. Among those guys is that stupid puppet I hate so much.

Knowing that *she* is standing in daddy's way makes me furious. She's nothing but a puppet, and doesn't even know her place! She and Mai are always doing stuff that pisses me off.

But daddy is really strong, and he can beat them all up by setting demons after them, so I don't really have anything to worry about. Still, watching them quarrel with daddy makes me super mad. I wanna crush them like ants!

Those guys are a bunch of weaklings, so daddy told Takeda, one of his underlings, to take care of them and left to the room where the portal machine is. I wanted to surprise daddy, so I followed him in silence. When I got to the portal machine room, daddy was in front of the machine with Nicholai, the old geezer who invented it.

I don't need to use it since I can open a portal from anywhere thanks to my magic compact. My plan was to teleport to the back of the machine and surprise daddy, but before I could do that, the puppet and her friends busted through the door.

Those idiots wanted to defeat daddy, but he got angry and locked himself inside the machine. But the machine began acting weird, so daddy ordered the old geezer to "stop the machine!", but he answered some gibberish like "you and I are both going to die in order to atone for the crimes committed due to our selfish desires" or something like that.

When I thought about daddy dying, fear gripped my heart. If daddy dies, I'm going to become all alone again! That's why I leapt to the front of the machine. When the puppet saw me, she made a very stupid-looking face, which I think suits her perfectly!

I unlocked the door, saving daddy. He looked happy to see me and said "now, take me to your world!"

I cast a spell using the compact, and both daddy and I entered the portal I made. Using the compact's magic, daddy can reach the other side safely even without the machine. That thing is still running but it has nothing to do with me, so I don't care.

That old geezer Nicholai fell off somewhere before we reached the other side. I could have rescued him if I wanted to, but I don't care. As if I would. He tried to kill daddy!

When we arrived at the castle, daddy said "good work" while petting my head. It made me very happy. He tells me "you're the only one I can depend on", and I answer "I'll do anything if it's for you, daddy", which made him smile. I love it when daddy looks happy.

A long time ago, I was born in this world together with Mai.

At that time, it had gotten dark so the old hag babysitter who was supposed to take care of the Real One went home. The Real One was really small at the time, so she got scared. She started panicking and had one of her usual seizures.

The Real One was hurting so bad, she was on the verge of breaking down into pieces. That's why Mai and I appeared, to take away her pain. From that point on, Mai and I came to console the Real One whenever she cried. Mai was always complaining about me, but at first she didn't pull my leg that much.

However... when *that* happened, Mai started to suppress me all the time, prohibiting me from ever coming out and tucking me away in a dark place.

One time, when I came to, I was at the front.

On the previous day, a cage with two white pet mice was delivered to the house. However, one of the rats inside the cage was now dead. I immediately understood that Mai and the real one had run away once they saw the dead mouse.

I put my hand inside the cage and grabbed the living mouse. But the mouse was scared, so it bit my finger. Furious, I put my hand still holding the mouse inside a basin full of water.

In my hand, the mouse started struggling. When it stopped, I let go of my hand and the now cold mouse floated to the surface of the cold water.

At that time, the Real One suddenly came back and started screaming. Then Mai came back too, and banished me to that dark place using a strong power.

I've been sealed in there until daddy first arrived. Being alone is lame. Mai didn't even listen to my side of the story.

If daddy hadn't pulled me out when he came to visit Mai's place, I'd still be in that dark place. Daddy listened to my story and didn't scold me. He told me that I can do as I please. That's why I love my daddy and the only place I want to be is at his side.

Another World ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

When I came to, my entire body was hurting all over.

At first I didn't know where I was, only that I was laying down on the floor of a big room.

Uh… I… no, *we* were…

We went through the passage in the Abandoned Factory and arrived at the SEBEC building. We fought many demons who appeared one after another as we blindly made our way through the building's labyrinth of doors and hallways. Eventually, we reached the "Branch President Office" on the top floor, where we confronted the president of SEBEC's Mikage-cho branch, Kandori.

Ah… that's right. At that time, a most peculiar thing happened.

Somehow, that man knew both my face and name, yet I didn't have any idea who he was just a few hours ago. But frankly speaking, I felt something strange the first time I saw that Kandori person.

I don't remember him, but I'm sure we've met before. It's a sweet and nostalgic feeling… is this what they call *déjà vu*?

But setting those feelings of familiarity aside, that man is truly a bad person. Kandori seemed polite at first when greeting us, but that politeness was clearly masking thin-veiled hostility and he didn't even try lending an ear to what we were saying. When my friends got angry and tried using force, he fought back…

Turns out, he's a Persona-user too. Today's been one surprise after another.

Kandori left in the middle of the fight after leaving it in the hands of one of his underlings. We managed to defeat the guy, and chased after Kandori. We found an elevator on the back of the room and took it to the underground, where there was a laboratory and a giant machine. From what we've heard from the scientists trapped in an underground room, the machine, called the "DVA System,"[7] was the origin of this entire incident.

Right in front of us, Kandori entered the machine together with some old guy in a white coat. Immediately after, the machine started acting strange. We tried to stop it, but it was no good. And then…

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[7] Despite being localized as DEVA System in the English version of the game, the name of the machine is supposed to be merely "DVA System", short for Dimensional Variable Accelerator System.

Yes, I remember now. And then the girl in black appeared out of nowhere! But she took Kandori and disappeared right away, leaving behind the out-of-control machine. And before I noticed it, I was here.

“Where… am I?”

As I looked around in confusion, I soon recognized where I am.

This is... without a doubt, St. Hermelin High’s gymnasium! The school emblem is shining on the top of the stage at the front of the gym, and there’s no way I’d mistake it. I love this school so much, I know its every nook and corner.

But… *Why* are we here!?

I try to stand up, but something gets caught up on my jacket’s hem. Inaba, who’s laying by my side on the floor still unconscious, is gripping it tightly.

Ah… that’s right.

At that time, the machine started going haywire, making strange sounds and affecting the surrounding area. I don’t think I can properly explain it… it was a very strange feeling. The machine was emitting some strange wave-like energy non-stop. I couldn’t see it, but my whole body felt it. At the time, the air became heavy like we were underwater and my vision started wavering like in a heat haze. The hard metal floor beneath my feet became soft and sticky like some sort of pudding, before it started crumbling apart like sand.

Since I was the one closest to the machine, I fell down the hole in the floor first, and I faintly remember someone trying to pull me up by grabbing my jacket… which according to the evidence must’ve been Inaba.

Jay is lying unconscious by Inaba’s feet and Nanjo is a few meters away. Thank goodness they’re all here. But most importantly, I have to wake them up now.

I get up while gently breaking Inaba’s grip from my jacket.

“Hey everyone, wake up!”

At the sound of my voice, Jay awoke with a twitch. He slowly rose his upper half from the ground, and looked at me with vacant eyes.

“Are you okay, Jay?”

“Sonomura…? Where are we…?”

“St. Hermelin High’s gymnasium.”

“Why are we here…? I see… The DVA System teleported us here.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“But… why *here*?”

Jay twisted his neck to look around, but as his eyes surveyed the gym Jay’s face became increasingly puzzled.

“Kandori! You’ll pay for what you’ve done!”

A little further than Jay, Nanjo woke up screaming.

“Alright, leave that bastard to me!”

Inaba followed immediately after in the same fashion.

“Inaba, Nanjo, calm down. Look at where you are.”

As they heard my voice, Inaba and Nanjo turned to me with dubious looks. They slowly looked up, then down, and then left and right. After that, they turned to me again.

“What the hell. This looks like the old school gym they tore down half a year ago! What’s going on!?”

“Tore down…? Oh, I see. They built a new school gym in your world.”

“Sonomura…? What did you just say?”

“If my grasp on the situation is correct, then the world we are in right now is not our own, and you are a different person than the ‘Maki Sonomura’ we know. Isn’t that so, Sonomura?”

I nodded to Nanjo, who had quickly regained his usual calm.

“Amazing as always, Nanjo. When did you notice it? That I’m not the ‘Maki Sonomura’ everyone was talking about, I mean.”

“You confirmed it just now. My suspicions began from the way you acted and talked before, but it was such an absurd theory I didn’t fully commit to it before now.”

“A parallel world, huh…” Jay whispered.

“That’s the most likely possibility, Jay. We have been transported to this world thanks to the spatial distortions created by the out-of-control DVA System.”

Jay nodded, but Inaba had a blank look on his face.

“Oh, come on! Can you three stop saying things normal people wouldn’t understand!? Speak normally!”

“It’s going to be difficult explaining things in a way that *you* would understand. Oh well, let me try doing it anyway. I’ll try using small words so that small-brained individuals like you can understand. Imagine many different universes all existing at the same time. This world is not in our universe, but a different one. This world is very similar to ours, but there are a few

small differences, like the fact that our gym was renovated and this one wasn't. The passage of time is the same in both worlds, so everyone has a counterpart here. In other words, this Maki Sonomura is not the same as 'our' Maki Sonomura."

"W-Wait a second… if this isn't 'our Maki Sonomura' we know, then where is the real Sonomura!?"

"I do not know that."

"I'm sorry Inaba, and everyone else too, for not speaking up about it. I already had my suspicions that I got sent to another world, but I didn't get the chance to bring it up. Plus, I thought everything would go back to normal once we defeated Kandori so…"

"Oh, don't fuck with me! I'm going back to our world! I have to save Sonomura or else…"

"Calm down, Inaba."

Jay says so in a soothing voice, but in return Inaba glares daggers back at him.

"How can I be calm, asshole!? Sonomura might still be trapped inside that hospital with those monsters! There's no way I can calm down!"

"Screaming here like this won't help either. You have to calm down and think of a solution. First of all, do you even know how to go back?"

Inaba had no comeback for that.

At that time, the doors to the gym flew open, and "my" world's Eriko Kirishima entered.

"There y'all are!"

As soon as they heard the heavily accented words coming from Kirishima's mouth, the three guys made faces of shock, their mouths hanging open.

"Kirishima... is using Tohoku-ben[8]…!?"

"Oh, this is my normal. When I heard that fancy speech from her other self, I was just as surprised. They look exactly the same but the way they talk couldn't be any more different."

Kirishima zeroed on me.

"What'cha doin' loping around 'round here for? Something mighty awful happened to Naito! He's hurting somethin' mighty fierce and he's at the infirmary right now, hurry!"

"Huh!?"

As soon as I heard "something bad happened to Naito," I started panicking. Unable to keep standing still, I ran out of the gym past Kirishima.

[8] Japanese variant from Tohoku. Appears in Japanese pop culture as the stereotypical "country hick" accent.

“Hey, Sonomura!”

Jay tried yelling at me to slow down, but right now I’m only concerned about Naito’s wellbeing…! I don’t have any time to waste…!

I vigorously open the door to the infirmary, and the first thing I see is Naito sitting on one of the beds. Just by glancing at him, I can tell he’s hurt all over. His left arm is wrapped in bandages and in a sling hanging from his neck. His uniform is also full of tears.

“Naito!”

As he turned in my direction, I could see his face clearly. He has a piece of gauze covering a bruise in his cheek, a bandage on his nose, a purple bruise under his eyes, and many small scratches on his face.

“That’s horrible… what happened to you!?”

“Ah, Sonomura. That girl in black paid me a visit just a while ago. She kicked my ass. Can you believe it? I got my ass handed by a little kid… I’m so lame.”

Naito grins while holding his bandaged arm.

My chest is swelling with anger and revolt. She wasn’t satisfied with just kidnapping Chisato, and now did this to Naito…!? Why that little... she’ll pay for this…!

“Sonomura! Hah, finally got you. You’re pretty fast.”

That was Jay, who finally caught up with me, soon followed by Nanjo. As soon as he saw who else was in the infirmary, he let out a yell.

“N-Naito!? Why are you here!?”

“Naito? I see… it certainly looks like him.” Nanjo said after pondering a little.

“Wait, wait a second… if Nanjo’s story from before is true, then this Naito is not the same one we know, the one who went missing two months ago… right?”

That was said by Inaba, who arrived a little late.

At first, Naito was looking at the trio’s conversation with a strange look on his face, but then slowly leaned forward and looked at Jay.

“You… you guys… you came from the other side, didn’t you!?”

Jay looked at Naito with a started expression.

“From ‘the other side’? Naito, is that you? I mean, the one who disappeared two months ago?”

“Yes, it’s me! Yosuke Naito! But… why are you guys here!?”

“That’s our line! We thought you had disappeared, but you’ve been here these past two months!?”

“Ah. On that day two months ago, Chisato… no, Kasai and I, were leaving the school via the front gate when we suddenly got dizzy and fainted. I still don’t know what happened after that, but we were in this world when we woke up.”

“Then this means… Chisato Kasai, who disappeared with you, is also in this world?”

“Yes… we came here together, but I don’t know where she is right now. That girl in black kidnapped Kasai and took her somewhere else. I think she’s still somewhere in this world, but…”

Naito, who at first was so excited to meet other people from this world, suddenly fell silent with a dark look on his face… anyone can see he’s super worried about Chisato.

“Naito… what you said before was true, about there being another world and that you came from there. I didn’t believe your story at first. I laughed and told you to stop joking… I’m sorry.”

As I apologized, Naito smiled a little.

“It’s fine. No sane person would believe something like that without proof, really. If it hadn’t happened to me and someone told me a story like that, I’m sure I wouldn’t believe in them.”

“Besides, there were both a Naito and a Chisato in this world, way before. Where did the Naito I knew went to…?” I muttered to myself.

That’s right… where the hell did he disappear to…?

The Maki Sonomura from the other world too… where the hell is she?

As those thoughts buzzed inside my head, a strange feeling of uneasiness spread throughout my body. And then, a voice whispered in my mind:

“Do not think about this anymore. You mustn’t think about things that make you anxious. You must only think about bright and fun things. You mustn’t feel negative emotions. That is not your assigned role…”

I can feel the tension leaving my body.

That’s right, their disappearance has nothing to do with me.

There’s no need for me to think about those things and start feeling bad…

“By the way, Naito…”

Jay said to Naito with a smile.

“What is it?”

“The next time you call me by my surname, I’ll kill on the spot!”

“Oh yeah… my bad. The Su… I mean, the Jay of this world doesn’t care whether you call him by his surname or given name. I mean, everyone calls him either Suzakuin or Jihei.”

“If you… say *that*... one more time, I’ll kill you!”

“How long are you two going to keep up this worthless conversation!?” Nanjo said so with a bored face. “Shouldn’t we be thinking of a plan of action right now…?”

Right after Nanjo said that, the entire room started trembling.

“E-Earthquake!” Someone cried out.

And it’s a big one at that.

The glass door of the medicine cabinet is shaking and a vase near the window fell on the floor, spilling water everywhere. I couldn’t keep standing up and fell on the ground. The beds in the infirmary are bolted to the ground and were right next to me, so I clung to the bed’s legs.

The tremor ended as abruptly as it started. The fluorescent lamps on the ceiling were still shaking and making noise, but other than that the infirmary was dead silent.

“Thank goodness it sto… Aah!”

My scream turned everyone’s attention to me, and in turn I pointed to what I saw.

There, reflected in the glass of the large window facing the schoolyard, was a girl who appeared to be six, perhaps seven years old. Both her clothes and the ribbon on her hair were black. In contrast with her small childlike face, she was glaring at us with anger and hate in her eyes. That’s the girl in black…!

“Hey, why do you keep tormenting us…!?” I yell as I stand up. “Not just hurting Naito, but all the bad things you do to this school too… why are you like this!?”

The image in the glass smiles at me in disdain.

“This school and everyone in it are special to Mai, that’s why I’ll trample on every single one of you. If you don’t have the guts to stand up against me, just keep cowering in fear!”

“Uh… you said your name was Aki, right? Tell me, Aki… who is this ‘Mai’? I don’t know anyone by that name!”

“Shut up and don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, puppet.”

“Puppet? What do you mean? My name is Maki Sonomura!”

“Heh… I don’t care what your name is, you’re just an eyesore. It would have been better if you got stuck in the portal or got sent somewhere else. But, oh well. I was going easy on you in the past ‘cause you’re just a puppet, but now that you’re standing up to daddy, things are different. I will trap you guys in here, so that you never interfere again!”

With a triumphant sneer, the image in the window disappears. I rush to the window, but there’s nothing reflected on the glass. I place my hand on the window sash to open it and look outside, but it won’t budge.

She said “trap you guys here”… no freaking way…

“What’s wrong, Sonomura?”

“This window won’t open!”

“Is it locked?”

Inaba moves to the window and puts a hand on the frame. The window is unlocked, but it still won’t move an inch.

“Is it like that child said then? Nevertheless, that phenomenon…”

I ignored whatever Nanjo was about to say and ran out of the infirmary.

“Where are you going, Sonomura?” Jay calls out.

“To the front entrance!”

Jay seemed to understand my line of thinking as he soon sprinted out of the infirmary and started running next to me. Following him was Inaba, running hurriedly right behind us.

“Ah, wait, Jay! You gotta stop running ahead without explaining stuff…”

“Now’s not the time for that, dumbass!”

As I suspected, the entrance door is firmly locked and won’t move.

“Just as I feared… the girl in black trapped us here.”

“Does that kid have that much power?”

“She isn’t just a kid, Jay. She’s able to control demons just like we use Personas, and she can appear and disappear as she pleases. Either way, she has some freaky powers.”

“Goddammit. What’s up with that brat?”

“And just like what we just witnessed, she doesn’t need to be present in order to communicate with us.” Said Nanjo, who finally caught up with us.

“That’s fine and well but, Nanjo… there’s something that’s been bothering me.”

“What is it now, Inaba?”

“How come you’re not out of breath after running all the way here? That’s effing strange.”

“Hmph. As if I’d run out of breath from *that* much exercise. Know that my body is different from yours.”

“You really are a son of a bitch…” Inaba mumbles.

I really admire this skill of theirs to avoid losing their calm in situations like these. Most of the time.

“Anyway, let’s look for that girl in black. She seems to like watching people suffer, so she might still be somewhere in this school. Let’s find her!”

“That’s right… this is our best bet for now.” Nanjo said so and nodded.

“I’ll help too!” Said Naito, who had just arrived limping all the way from the infirmary.

“Naito, what are you doing!? You have to rest! You can’t be walking around with injuries like those! The infirmary should be safe for now, and Nurse Natsumi is there. If anything happens, we’ll tell you.”

“I agree with Sonomura. If anything happens, we’ll update you right away, but please take it easy and go take a rest.” Jay, who was standing behind me, told Naito.

“I see… that’s right… I’ll only be a hindrance like this.”

Naito looks unhappy about it, but at the very least he’s convinced. Thank goodness… I don’t want to see him any more hurt.

After escorting him back to the infirmary, we started exploring the school.

“I *know* this is not our world… but it still feels very weird.”

Jay whispered that after we had checked some classrooms.

“You think so too, Jay? It doesn’t look that different at first, but even though everyone looks the same, their personalities and the way they talk is way off. Gives me the creeps.”

Many students who happened to be still inside the school were trapped in here alongside us, so we’re asking them for clues about the girl in black.

Jay said that they were “strange”, but from my perspective they’re acting normal. Yuko Himeno is still the same arrogant princess that I know, with the fake cute act and all. And there’s Kirishima, always willing to lend people a hand and asking people if they need help with anything in that heavy accent.

“Now that I think about it… when I was in the other world I met a student I haven’t seen before… but who was he? Did he come from another school? We’ve never had a transfer student in our school...” I monologue to myself in a whisper.

That’s right… up until now, no one ever transferred in... right…?

I mean, where would they transfer from? Is there even such a place…?

At that moment, my head went blank. When it comes to Mikage-cho, I usually know everything, but outside the city… I remember nothing…

Eh, why!?

I mean, I took the subway downtown to go shopping and to the movies… that’s right, I had fun at the amusement park with… everyone…

No concrete image comes up. The more I try to remember, the more the images in my memories seem to escape my grasp. Nothing remains after that. It’s like a haze has settled in my mind.

Why…?

Why?

WHY!?

“A student you haven’t seen before, huh? Maybe he came here from our world too… what do you think, Sonomura?”

With a gasp, I snap back into reality.

H-Huh…? What was I thinking about just now? I feel like it was something that was upsetting me…

It’s no good, I can’t remember…

Oh, well. Nothing I can do about it if that’s the case.

“We cannot discard that possibility. This incident created abnormalities in the walls separating the dimensions, so seeing someone else wander in this world wouldn’t be strange at all.” Nanjo commented while I was still dazed.

“Huh? Ah, yes. He might have.” I said in a hurry.

At that time, we heard the sound of glass breaking from what seemed to be the end of the hallway, immediately followed by the scream of a girl.

“What’s at the end of this corridor?”

“The classroom used by the art club.”

“Let’s check it out.”

Jay ran to the room and we followed him.

The door to the art room has been left wide open. No… that's not it.

The door simply wasn't there. The pieces of what used to be the door were scattered on the floor of the hallway. Inside the deserted art room, a strange creature stood amidst the easels left there.

"What's that…?"

"It looks like a rat… doesn't it?"

"I didn't know this world had rats the size of cows…"

As Inaba said, it looks like a rat at first glance, but as Nanjo said, it was the size of a cow. Its body is covered in shining silver metal and its perfectly-round eyes flash green like a Christmas tree. The forelimbs were large and rodent-like, looking like they were made from pearl pink porcelain.

Size aside, it had a certain charm and was a little cute. It was more like a clockwork toy rat than a realistic replica. Despite that, the large teeth and the growling-like machine sounds it did were rather spooky.

Standing in front of the rat, there is a tall young man.

Oh… that man, he is the one I bumped into in the school of the other world! He doesn't seem frightened at all, and is even smiling, as if finding the situation amusing.

Who is he? I also don't know his name, but he's wearing the school uniform. Is he the same guy from that world or this world's version of him…?

Yuka Ayase was on the back of the art room, clinging to the wall.

"Oh, come on! This is so, like, unfair…"

Yuka was crying.

"Ayase! Go by the wall and come here!"

Jay shouts at her.

"But my legs, like, won't move…"

Seems like she's too scared to move. Without thinking, I entered the art room.

"S-Sonomura, you idiot! Don't go there!"

Ignoring Inaba's warnings, I made my way next to Yuka while muffling my footsteps. Fortunately, the giant rat still seems to be distracted by the man in front of him and hasn't noticed me. When I got to the back of the room, Yuka started clinging to me.

"Bwaaaah! Makiiii, I'm scared!"

“It’s okay now, Yuka. I’m with you. Let’s go back to everyone.”

I hugged Yuka, whispering words of encouragement to her. She might insist on pretending to be a party-girl in front of other people, but she’s very meek when we hang out. People might say all sorts of things about her, but deep down Yuka is a good girl.

Yuka and I started walking, but as soon as we made a move, a silver metallic leg was blocking our way. Before we realized it, the metallic rat had turned around, baring its pearl pink front teeth to us, growling.

Protecting Yuka with my back, I glare at the mouse in front of me.

I’m not letting a toy rat intimidate me! Placing my hand on my chest, I focus my mind and call forth to the depths of my heart.

“*Goddess inside of me… Persona… please, come forth!*”

But my concentration was broken when I heard a loud voice yelling at me.

“Don’t stand there waiting to be attacked, idiot!”

It was the strange boy from just now.

Looking like he couldn’t care any less about Yuka and I, the boy kicks the rat’s behind with all his might. With an agility that doesn’t match the size of its body, the rat quickly turns to face the boy.

**Squeak*!*

The rat stands on its hinds legs and gives an exceptionally high-pitched growl. The boy didn’t brace himself for running or escaping or anything like that, he just stood there grinning.

The mouse brandishes its shiny steel claws. At the same time, the lights in the room start to darken. Unconsciously, I rub my eyes to see if the problem is in my eyes.

A black fog spreads through the room, with the boy at the center. The fog behind him seems to solidify at the same rate the room darkens.

Apparently unfazed by the darkness, the rat brings down its claws, aiming at the boy’s throat. However, a strange-looking figure wearing shining dark purple armor emerged from behind the boy.

The “thing” that materialized from the fog was incredibly tall and wrapped in a wavering dark purple aura. What seemed to be his face was hidden behind the darkness of the fog so only its shining red eyes could be seen. In its arm, which was much longer than a normal person’s, the figure held a sharp spear that shone in crimson.

The thing in the dark fog aimed and in a big motion, drew an arc in the air with its spear. With a precision lacking hesitation, the crimson spear is embedded in the rat.

**Squeak*! *Squeak*…! Bzzt, bzzt…*

Now that the rat's body has been pierced through, the eyes started flashing and a giant squeak escaped from its mouth. Before long, a muffled explosion-like sound comes from inside it, and the rat stops moving.

Although it all happened in an instant, the images were burned into my eyes frame by frame. Before I realized it, the art room had returned to normal and no trace of the black fog remained.

"Sonomura! Ayase!"

Now that the threat has been dealt with, my friends ran over to me. In my shock, I had forgotten Yuka was with me, so I quickly turned around and saw she had fainted sometime during the short battle just now.

I try holding Yuka up in my arms and shaking her awake, but I suddenly realize my knees are trembling and slide down to the floor with her.

"That thing just now was a Persona, right? So that guy is a Persona-user too."

I ask Inaba, who is crouching by my side and looking at me worriedly.

"Well, it seems so."

"Who's he…? I never saw him before."

"The guy's name is Kido. He came from our world so that's why you don't know him. He transferred to our school six months ago, so not even the Sonomura from our world knows him. But why is that guy of all people here…? Why couldn't it have been someone nicer?"

I was listening to Inaba's words, but not paying attention to him. Instead, I was looking at Kido, who was having a conversation with Nanjo and Jay next to the wreckage of the mechanical rat.

That guy… intrigues me.

It's not a matter of liking or disliking him… I can't put it into words very well. I can't say for sure, but his presence intrigues me.

It may be that having someone I don't know in the school is making me uneasy. When I look at him, I start becoming even more anxious. I don't know why…

"What's wrong, Sonomura? Is that guy so interesting or what?"

Inaba didn't seem very amused.

“Oh, that’s not it… I was thinking about what kind of person he is and why he came to this world… Just because I haven’t met him and all…”

“Tch. That Kido is unsociable as hell, yet the girls in the other world are all over him. Beats me why, though.”

“He’s tall and handsome. *You* wouldn’t understand.”

We were so distracted we didn’t notice Jay had walked over to us until he started patting Inaba’s head.

“Shut up! You’re not that much taller than me!”

“I’m 175 cm[9] tall, and you?”

Inaba was silent for a moment.

“Ah, shut up, shut up! If height really was that important we’d have different height groups, not different countries! But we don’t, so it doesn’t matter!”

Inaba tried to laugh it off, but it sounded terribly fake. He made his way over to Nanjo and Kido while Jay snickered.

“He really wears his heart on his sleeve.”

After that, Jay got on his knees next to me and gently pat the still-unconscious Yuka’s cheeks.

“No good, she’s out cold. We’ll have to carry her.”

Jay pulls up one of Yuka’s arms.

“Hey, someone lend me a hand.”

“I refuse. I don’t want to catch stupid.”

Nanjo’s reply was immediate.

“Thanks for the sympathy, Nanjo! Inaba, gimme a hand here!”

“Heh, so you want help from the not-tall, un-handsome me?”

“Screw you too. Kido, you?”

But Kido ignored Jay completely. He was close enough to hear him, though. Aren’t they all being a little mean, ignoring a friend like that? Jay shrugged, lifted Yuka and put her on his back.

“Jay, I’ll help you.”

“It’s okay, Sonomura.”

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[9] Around 5’7.

When we tried leaving the art room, I noticed something shining from the corner of my eye, so I looked back to the center of the room. The unmoving mechanic rat is there but… something is different.

It's the eyes… The light bulb-like eyes who lost their shine some time ago are now flashing in a weak yellow color.

"Huh…?"

As I look at them, the rat's eyes start shining brighter, and light the walls of the art room like headlights. In the center of the illuminated wall, a black silhouette appeared and eventually took the form of Aki.

"My poor Tesso, he's all broken now…!" Aki sounded genuinely sad, but her face quickly went back to her usual sneer. "You idiots seem to be able to put up a fight… and I need new toys now that Tesso is gone, so that works out. This is more interesting than bullying Mai anyway. That coward can keep hiding inside the Lost Forest for all I care."

Aki then started giggling.

"Hey, did you know? If you want to go after my daddy, you'll have to cross over to my turf! If you come here, you'll meet a beautiful queen. A wonderful queen who's a perfect match for an air-headed puppet! I can't wait! Hehe… Ahahahahaha!"

Ending with a high-pitched laugh, the projection was suddenly interrupted. Afterwards, the ground started shaking but stopped immediately after.

"Queen…? Who is she talking about? And what does she mean by 'her turf'?"

"She was probably talking about the Dark Side."

"The 'Dark Side'?"

"Yes. Long ago, this city used to be beautiful and peaceful, but one day a wall suddenly appeared and divided the city in half. From that day onwards, that Aki girl started to torment the town with demons and turned it into the dangerous place it is today. People say that she lives on the other side of the wall, and that everything on the other side is now a bunch of ruins. That's how the rumor goes anyway, so I don't know the truth. Everyone calls the other side of the town, 'the Dark Side'."

"I see…"

Jay put his hands on his hips and tipped his head downwards, as he always did when pondering something. However, by doing that, Yuka slipped off his back and fell to the floor.

"Ouch… that hurt, dammit!"

“Oh... you woke up.” Jay said timidly. “Thank goodness, Ayase.”

“Seems like our next objective is clear. Well then, let’s go.”

Nanjo started to walk away briskly.

“What are you waiting for? The sooner we go, the sooner we’ll finish this”

“But Nanjo, that brat must be planning something. This has ‘trap’ written all over it”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained. There are times when one must take risks. Kido! Where are you going now?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I see, you’re right. You have no reason to accompany us anywhere, but our goal is defeating Kandori. We’ll only be able to return to our original world when this incident is over, and there is only one way to do it.”

Nanjo turned back on his heels. He really is quick at making decisions, for better or worse.

But Kido called out to Nanjo, who at that point was already in the hallway outside the room.

“Wait… did you say Kandori just now?”

“Yes. Is something the matter?”

“Hmph. Seems like we have the same goal. I’ll stick with you guys for a while.”

Kido then followed Nanjo out in the hallway.

“The hell’s up with that guy?” Jay murmured.

“You betcha… that tall and handsome thing is a misunderstanding for sure.”

That remark was Inaba’s.

Reservations about Kido aside, everyone eventually followed him out of the room.

“Oh come on, why is everyone ignoring me!?” Yuka complained while puffing her cheeks. “I’m a frail girl, you have to treat me nice!”

Oh no, even I forgot about Yuka too! I ran back to give her a hand and we left the room together.

We went back to the infirmary with Yuka. Naito sat on one of the beds, clearly on edge. Once he saw Kido, Naito tried to strike up a conversation.

“Is that you, Kido!? So even you fell into this world too!”

Kido looked at him but said nothing. Naito didn’t seem to take the lack of response badly, so Jay barged in the conversation.

“We think the school isn’t sealed anymore. Try opening the window.”

Naito did as Jay suggested and the window opened easily this time. Seeing that, I sighed in relief.

“Thank goodness… now the other students are safe.”

“So, we can go back home now? Thank goodness, see ya!”

Yuka, who looked like she could barely walk and had been leaning on me up till now, suddenly said so in a burst of energy and flew out of the room.

“The Ayase of this world didn’t seem to change at all. She’s practically the same.” Inaba remarked with a surprised face, while Naito nodded and gave a wry smile.

“That’s right. Almost everyone in this world acts totally different from their counterparts in our world, it’s kinda weird. But then there are people like Ayase who act the same, so it’s a big relief to me. Oh, if the doors are open then there’s something in the courtyard I want you guys to see. I don’t know how to explain it very well… it’s… *peculiar*.”

Naito looked dead serious.

“What is it, Naito?”

“In the courtyard? You’re talking about the shrine, right?”

“Ah, yes. What’s so peculiar about it? There was one in the other school, but…”

“In the school of our world, there’s a very old fragment of a rock inside the shrine. It’s called ‘Hilemon Stone’ and is said to be the guardian god of the school. When Kasai and I came to this world, we woke up in front of that shrine. When we were unconscious, we all had the same strange dream. A strange masked person named Philemon appeared before us and said this: *unless you tear apart the ties of attachment that brought you here, you will be unable to leave this world*. I don’t understand what he meant, but I think there’s something inside of that shrine connecting this world to our own.”

“When I came to this world, I also woke up in front of that shrine.”

Kido, who had been silently listening to the conversation, threw in his two cents.

“If that’s the case, then we must pay the shrine a visit.”

Nanjo consented to the idea.

“I’ll take you there. Come this way.”

We followed Naito to the courtyard.

Interlude ～desert scenery～

Where am I?

I was in my hospital room. That room is the only place where… I'm allowed to live. But when I came to, I was here.

White sand as far as the eye can see. It is very bright, but for some reason the sky isn't blue. There are white clouds, as if made of glass. There's no sun in the white sky, but its surface emits a strong light. Because of that strange, evenly illuminated sky, there are no shadows anywhere in this desert.

Alone, I walk around making my way through the dunes.

As I've been walking barefoot on the sandy terrain, my feet start to hurt. Even so, I do not stop walking. I don't know why, but for some reason I feel like I'm not alone in this dry land.

Before long, a white building appeared in front of me. Like an ancient Greek temple, it was a tall building surrounded by tall pillars. It looked like a painting made by Magritte[10], one of my favorite artists. It's a strange building, like it's playing a trick on my depth perception.

On the other side of the white pillars, a girl with a red ribbon is running along the perimeter.

"Wait!"

I chase after the girl. She turns around the corner, and I do the same. There's no sign of anyone besides the two of us.

The side of the building is also playing a trick on my depth perception.

"Wait, why are you running away!?"

Eventually, I caught up to the girl. However, as soon as I grabbed her arm, her figure crumbled. Surprised, I fell on my butt. Where she stood there was only a pile of sand. When I opened the hand I used to grab her, the hot sand spilled from my fingers and fell to the ground.

When I raised my head, the building had disappeared and the vast expanse of white sand was restored. I slowly stand up and, dragging my heavy legs, resume walking.

"I don't want to walk anymore. Why can't I stop...?"

[10] René Magritte (1898-1967), a Belgian surrealist artist.

In a valley between two dunes, I finally get exhausted and sit down. On the ridge of the hills, the wind blows hoisting the sand. The sky above me is a cloudy white, as if looking at the ceiling of a hospital room from inside an oxygen tent.

It was then that I noticed that my legs were starting to skin into the ground. Quicksand…!?

I desperately cried for help. Slowly, my body sunk into the sand. Several faces are looking down from the top of the dunes. All of them were familiar. They were my best friends, my mother, and the doctors in charge of me.

All of them tried to help me, but as soon as I grasped their hands, their forms disappeared. Before long, I was buried up to my chest.

Once again, someone appeared atop the dunes. This time, however, it was a man I've never seen before. Seemingly not caring about dirtying his expensive-looking black suit on the sand, he slowly walked down the dunes.

I realized that at this feet there was a shadow. Why does that man alone have a shadow in this shadowless desert…?

The man came over to me, bent over and held out a hand. I didn't know whether he would disappear or not when I touched him, but I was panicking so I grasped his hand. He didn't disappear, so that hand must belong to someone who's actually here. The man then pulled me from the quicksand.

"Thank you."

I thanked him as I looked up. He was really tall.

As I stood up, I noticed my feet were feeling cold. When I looked down, I saw a white marble floor. I was inside the building with white pillars that disappeared a while ago. That made me feel a lot relieved. Sure I was inside the building with the funky depth perspective, but it was better than being in quicksand.

When I looked at the man again, he was holding a crystal jug and a glass on his hands. The jug was beautifully decorated and full of water. He poured water into a glass and held it out to me.

"You can drink it."

The white sand on his black jacket falls on the white marble with a sprinkling sound as the man stares at me.

When I look at his eyes, I can understand why he alone could save me. Looking into his eyes, I can sense a dark smell of destruction, just like the smell of disease I'm accustomed to. An endless darkness. I know very well how deep that darkness is, cold and permeating into one's existence.

Looking at the glass he was holding out to me, I suddenly realized I was really thirsty. I take the glass from his hand and drink it after a little pause. The water is good, cold. The good feeling from it spreads throughout my entire body.

"It's okay for you to stay here. There are water and shade, and no discomforts."

The man told me with a smile.

I thought "okay", since it was better than walking alone in a desert. But for an instant, a pang of uneasiness flashes through my chest.

Why was I walking through that desert? What was I looking for in it…?

However, I force down that uneasiness. Walking that hot desert alone is too much. No matter what I was looking for, it must've been nothing.

I lay down on the marble floor to rest my body. The cold temperature feels very relaxing. Even though I can return to the desert, I'm going to rest a little more here. This is a cool and quiet place with water.

I forget all of my worries, stop thinking and fall into a dreamless sleep…

Lost Forest ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

"Is there anything special about this world's… about the shrine?"

Nanjo asked me as we were making our way to the courtyard.

"In the courtyard, there is a shrine called 'Hilemon Shrine'. Having a shrine inside a school is a bit weird, but I never really questioned it. It seems to have been here ever since before the school was founded. People say it's where the school's guardian deity is worshipped, so it deserves respect. I don't know anything else, but it might have something to do with the other world."

By the time I finished my explanation, we had reached our destination.

Standing in front of the heavy glass doors I can see the courtyard looks exactly the same. It's an atrium surrounded by the white school walls on all sides, so it has natural sunlight.

In the middle of the courtyard there is a *torii* and a small shrine both made of grey stone. From the entrance of the courtyard to the *torii*, there is a small paved road.

"That's quite a small shrine…"

"It couldn't be that big if it has to be inside a school courtyard. Naito, do you remember where exactly you woke up?"

"Under the *torii*."

"And you, Kido?"

"Same place."

Jay and Nanjo sprinted to the *torii* and we followed them. In the shadow of the shrine, I see something white twinkle from the corner of my eye.

"Huh…?"

Looking closely, it is a white butterfly.

"Is that a cabbage white butterfly[11]…? Isn't it a little out of season…?"

"It is, but is that so strange?"

Jay said that while following the butterfly with his eyes. As if entranced by my words, everyone else was looking at the butterfly.

The butterfly sways in the blowing breeze fluttering its wings.

[11] Scientific name: *Pieris rapae*. Also known as "small white" or "cabbage butterfly."

As we stared at it, the swaying butterfly seemed to want to say something to us. Without knowing why, I couldn't avert my gaze.

"What's… this… feeling… sleeping spell…"

Someone… someone close by is saying something. Trying to say, at least. I don't understand what it is, neither can I try to. I'm just so… *enthralled* by the butterfly.

Slowly, my consciousness started fading…

"Welcome, lady and gentlemen."

An incredibly clear voice echoed very close to me.

As I snap into consciousness, the first thing that comes to mind is how dark everything looks. Did the sun set while I was dozing off? But the sun was shining brightly just a moment ago.

I look around, wondering if I'm under a *kitsune*'s[12] spell.

Jay, Nanjo and Inaba are near me, with Kido a little further away. All of them look bewildered.

Naito… isn't here. I'm feeling worried. Where did he go…?

The floor beneath us is decorated with black and white squares, just like a chess board. This place lacks a ceiling, walls and support pillars, as if we're floating in the middle of a dark space.

In front of us, there stood a tall person.

The person was dressed in shining pearl white clothes, and they were wearing a mask for some reason. It was a white symmetrical mask that seemed to be made of gypsum, but had no expression on its face. Instead, a figure of a butterfly with its wings spread open was painted on half of the mask. It didn't look like the cabbage white butterfly I saw earlier, but something that would live in the tropical jungle. Brightly-colored and possibly venomous.

"You've done well in coming here. I commend your willpower and courage."

So the voice I heard before was this person's voice.

Their speech and voice are both neutral, so I don't know if they're a man or a woman. Despite the fact that they were wearing a mask, the voice resounded clearly without being muffled. How strange.

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[12] Trickster fox spirits from Japanese folklore. The word can also refer to regular foxes.

"You are the chosen ones. Chosen regardless of your will, but not without reason. You came to this world in order to save its god. That is not something just anyone can do. It's because of the darkness that each of you hold inside your own hearts. Only those who know suffering can truly understand it, and thus you were chosen."

"I… saw you before, in a dream. You said your name was Philemon or something." Jay said after a short pause. "What are you? What do you mean 'chosen ones'? You talking about us becoming Persona-users? Listen, I'm fed up with DVA System this, Persona that, and now we even have parallel worlds thrown into the mix. You better start explaining stuff."

"You may not understand it all at the moment, but the truth shall be revealed in time. When that time comes, you'll also understand the reason you were chosen. From here onwards, your journey will be difficult. You must never forget your names."

The masked person suddenly points their finger at me, and I wince in reflex.

"Tell me, child: what are you?"

"What do you mean, *what* I am? I'm… me. I'm Maki Sonomura!"

The masked person nodded at my answer. I can't see their face, but I feel like they're looking at me with satisfaction.

"Regardless of what happens or what you may be told, the fact that you're also Maki Sonomura won't change. If you ever wish to stop being yourself, do not cross the line and become something else."

I don't understand what they're saying.

First of all, what do they mean by "you're *also* Maki Sonomura"? Are they saying there is another Maki somewhere else? And what's this about me wishing to stop being myself? I like myself… I've never *not* liked myself.

As I stood there trying to decipher what they just said, the masked person resumed talking.

"Never forget who you are. In the future, it shall become your strongest weapon. This is the most I can tell you at the moment. I called you here because there is someone I want you to meet. That person is the illusionary little girl who holds a great power. Right now, the girl is hiding in fear in the depths of the Lost Forest, and without her power, you won't be able to enter the Dark Side. If you manage to open her heart, the passage shall then open. The most I can do is escort all of you to her general location. Afterwards, it will be up to your own determination. The time of ruin is steadily approaching. Kandori, inside of his stronghold in the Dark Side, began the preparations for the last steps of his plan. If he isn't stopped, another tragedy will occur. Now, follow this butterfly."

The masked person calmly raised one hand. On their palm, there was a small white butterfly. I'm sure all of us had questions to ask them, but before we could say anything the masked person vanished into thin air. The butterfly, now our sole companion in this place, began to softly flutter its wings, heading into the darkness as it danced in the air.

"Ah, wait!"

I set off after the butterfly.

"Sonomura! If you go over there, you'll fall!" Inaba quickly shouted from behind me.

"It's alright! Look, there's a road."

Sometime during the masked person's speech, a narrow white road of light appeared, as if growing out of this floating platform in the middle of nothing. It stretches on, heading deeper into the dark space surrounding us.

"But should we trust a strange guy that easily? They were hiding their face under that fishy mask!"

As Inaba grumbled, the edges of the floating platform started crumbling.

"Inaba, behind you! If you guys don't get moving, you'll fall into the abyss!"

"Shit!"

We all started chasing the butterfly at full speed, while escaping the collapsing floor.

Both sides of the road are completely dark, but as we started to run, vague shadows started appearing and forming into shapes. Looking closely, they look like slender… trees?

I stopped walking and squinted my eyes. There are many trees all around us, so tightly packed together there are barely any gaps between them.

Behind me, I heard a thumping sound.

A pile of collapsed bodies is behind me.

"Don't stop so suddenly, Sonomura!"

"If you're going to stop, turn the brake lights on!"

"Remove your legs from the top of me this instant!"

"…"

Oh my… Since we were running at full speed and I stopped all of a sudden, the guys crashed into each other and fell over like dominoes. Someone's hand is brushing against my ankle, but I can't tell whose it is in that tangle of limbs.

"Hey… where's this place?"

"I wonder where…"

They finally realized we're not in that dark space anymore. Gone was the narrow white road, and now we were surrounded by a dense forest. So dense that the sky couldn't be seen because of the overlapping branches.

"Is this the Lost Forest which that masked person mentioned?" Nanjo suggested.

"Hey, there's a light shining over there." Jay, who had been running right behind me, pointed out. "Let's go check it out. It might be the exit of this forest for all we know."

It took a few tries, but the boys managed to untangle themselves and get back up with only a few slaps in the face and feet being stomped on. By the way, the hand that was brushing my ankle belonged to Jay.

"All right, let's go!"

Inaba pushed Jay's back, as if telling him to take the lead.

"Inaba, may I ask why you stepped on my foot, not only on purpose but also *twice*!?"

"Oh, shut it. You want me to do it again?"

"Ugh, just control yourself."

We started walking, following the light. After a few minutes, we found ourselves at a square-shaped clearing in the middle of the forest.

"Ah, look. That house is so cute♡"

I sprinted the rest of the way without thinking twice. In the middle of the clearing, there was a small gingerbread house, looking right out of a fairytale.

"Who are… you people?" A frightened voice asked.

The door of the gingerbread house opened just a little, and the face of a small girl peeked from the gap.

"When you ask for someone's name, it's only polite to name yourself first." Nanjo said so in his usual flat tone, staring at the girl.

The girl panicked, retreating her head inside and closing the door with a loud bang.

"What the hell Nanjo!?" Inaba jabbed Nanjo with his elbow. "You made her run away. What do we do now? Choose your words better, dammit!"

"If that's the case, then *you* handle this."

"Okay, leave it to me. I may not look like it, but I'm popular with kids and the elderly."

"Inaba… why the heck are you proud of *that*?"

"Shut up, I'm telling the truth!"

Inaba walked over to the chocolate biscuit door and knocked lightly on it.

“Hey, little lady, we aren’t scary people. Could you open this, just a little bit?”

“You guys… aren’t kidnappers?” A small voice came from the other side of the door.

“Inaba, don’t you think you’re making things worse? Let me try talking to her. Please, move.”

I pushed Inaba aside and started speaking to the door.

“Hey, we’d like to have a chat with you. Could you please come out, if only for a little bit? That boy over there may look a bit scary, but I swear they’re all good people. I promise you we won’t do anything scary or force you to do anything.”

I tried to channel as much kindness into my voice as I could. It was a bit hard, since I was talking to a door.

“Wait, Sonomura, which of us looks scary?”

“Inaba, shush!”

“Jaaay. Who’s she talking about? It’s not me, right?”

“Who knows… isn’t she talking about Kido?”

Ignoring Inaba’s outburst behind me, I kept staring quietly at the door.

After a few seconds, a small rustling sound could be heard from inside the house, no different than the sound of a small critter moving around. Eventually, the door opened just a little bit, the small girl peeping from that narrow gap.

Huh…? I’ve seen that girl before.

She has shoulder-length straight hair in a bob cut and wears a red ribbon. Her face, nose, and mouth are small and her eyes are big and beautiful. She looks like a cute little doll.

“Now I remember… You’re the girl who used to play in the flower garden all the time, aren’t you?”

The girl nodded at my question.

“You know that girl, Sonomura?” Jay asks from behind me.

“Yeah, back when my world was peaceful and there wasn’t a wall dividing the city, there used to be a flower garden on the town’s outskirts. From time to time you could see a little girl playing there. But around the same time the wall showed up, the garden turned into a forest out of the blue. After that, I never saw the girl again. I did wonder what happened to her…”

After that brief explanation, I turned back to the girl.

“Miss... how did you all get in here...? No one should be able to enter this forest…” the girl asked timidly.

“Well... this guy with a butterfly mask… hey, it’s a bit hard to talk over the door, can I come in?”

The girl suddenly withdrew from the door’s gap, but shortly after the door was fully opened from the inside. Holding my breath, I stepped inside.

The chocolate biscuit door fits the gingerbread house ambience perfectly, and it was just big enough for me to pass without having to bend my back. I heard a thud and some grumbling from behind me, so it looks like one of the guys hit their head on the door frame or something.

The inside of the room also looks like something out of a fairy tale. The pink walls look like they’ve been coated with sugar and jelly beans of all colors cover the floor in a mosaic pattern. The table and chairs at the center of the room as well as the sofa by the window are all child-sized, making me feel like I’m inside a dollhouse. It felt like a nice room for me, but I can tell the boys look uncomfortable.

The girl stood in a corner of the room, looking about to cry while holding a teddy bear tightly to her chest. If what that butterfly-masked person said is true, then this girl holds a great power that can open a way to the Dark Side.

But… this little girl, really?

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Mai.”

“*Mai*? Mai as in who that brat ‘Aki’ said she was ‘going to bully’? Was she talking about you?”

As Inaba inclined himself forward, Mai made a scared face and hid behind the sofa.

“Why are you hiding? You scared of me or somethin’?”

“Mister, why do you speak so loud...? I don’t like people who do that…”

Mr. I’m-good-with-children didn’t seem to take that remark very well. To the side, Nanjo and Jay are giggling at him.

“Huh? Wait, where’s Kido?”

“Over there.”

Jay pointed at Kido, who was sitting on the floor with his legs stretched.

“Why are you on the floor? Are you tired?”

"Nah. If I stand up my head's gonna bump on the ceiling."

"I see."

That's right, he's pretty tall. About 30 cm[13] taller than me, I think. Speaking of which, there's a red mark on his forehead, so he must've been the one who hit himself on the door before. Looks like he hit it pretty hard too, judging by the color of the bruise.

"Hey... miss?" called a voice close to my legs.

Looking down, I see that Mai got closer to me while I was distracted.

"Yes, dear?"

"You met Aki, right? What did she say about me?"

"That Aki girl messed up our world. When we asked why, she said that she wanted to mess up the things you like in order to lure you out. I don't understand it myself, though. Do you?"

"Y-Yes… I think… I do. But more importantly, you said that you met a person wearing a butterfly mask?"

"Yes, they're the one who guided us here. They also told us that a girl holds the key to the Dark Side. He was talking about you, right?"

"Yes… he was."

"We have to get to the Dark Side and see Aki. Actually, we're after the man called Kandori who's with her. Do you know that man?"

After hearing Kandori's name, Mai looked startled and her shoulders started shaking.

"That man… is scary…"

Mai had to pause for a few seconds to take a deep breath before continuing.

"Aki and me used to always be together. We were never apart. But when that man came, Aki separated herself from inside of me. After that, Aki wouldn't listen to what I said and started doing lots of bad stuff around town. Her sending demons to your school was just to harass me. Having Aki destroy the world I made is bad enough, but she also took over the other side of town and started calling it her world. She's even made herself a castle."

Mai's story left me speechless.

"Hey… what you said just now…"

[13] Around 12 inches.

“If I understood correctly, this girl created this world.” Nanjo said, taking the words out of my mouth. “This is what Philemon was talking about. She is this world’s creator, its god. When he told us to save this world’s god, he meant saving this little girl...”

“Nanjo, are you really going to take what this little girl is saying seriously?” Inaba argued.

“What Philemon said coincides with this girl’s story. Furthermore, we have no evidence that this girl is lying. ‘Saving a god’ is already a strange request in itself, I don’t think we benefit from trying to apply common sense to the situation. We have no other reliable source of information, so we must believe what this girl says for now.”

“Mai, is what Nanjo said just now true? Did you really create my-- this world?”

Mai nodded.

“But… I… have no idea what to do. I never thought something like this could happen. Because of Aki and that man, the world started to turn upside-down… It’s all out of my hands now… That’s why I’m hiding in this Lost Forest. If I stay here, I’ll be safe and won’t have to worry about bad stuff happening… I’m blocking the way to the Dark Side. No one wants to cross over to that side and so nothing bad will happen to them.”

“But…” Jay, who’d been behind me and quiet up until now, said softly. “You see, things might not be getting worse, but they’re not getting better either.”

Mai looked up at Jay.

“When things don’t move forward, they’ll reach a halt and go bad. It’s just like stale water.”

“But… But I… don’t know what’ll happen, that’s why I’m scared of going forward. Aren’t you all scared?”

“Well, of course moving forward is scary… but as life goes on, lots of good stuff will happen…” Inaba said. “Yeah, you’ll reach a moment where you’ll think ‘man, being alive rocks!’, and all that fear you felt will look silly!”

Mai made a puzzled face and turned to me.

“I still… don’t understand… then, then… why are you fighting…?”

“I… love this world, and my school. I want to protect them with my own power, with my own hands.”

Mai smiled happily at my answer.

“I understood your answer. I know you quite well… but these boys not so much… misters, why have you come this far?”

“In order to break through the current worst case scenario.” Nanjo answers immediately.

“That’s right.” Jay grinned. “Anyway, for me it’s ‘cause I don’t want the world to end. I want to be able to move forward.”

That was Jay. And then Inaba followed suit.

“Sheesh, what half-assed answers.” Inaba smirked. “I have someone I wanna protect! We have to beat up that Kandori guy as soon as possible so we can save the Sonomura of our world! We’ve got no time to spare! Hey, just open the way to the Dark Side already!”

Mai turned her head towards Inaba, clearly taken aback.

“Mister... why do you want to save that person…?”

“W-W-Why you ask… Jay, tell her!”

“Heh. I wanna save her ‘cause she’s my friend, but… do have another reason, Inaba?”

“A-A-As if! T-T-That’s right, she’s a friend, a friend. People should help their friends!”

Seemingly satisfied, Mai then turned to Kido. He’d been on the floor looking uninterested up until now, but he raised his head when Mai started looking at him.

“What is it…?”

“You’re a bit different from the others, mister… I know a little about the others, but this is my first time seeing you. Do you also have someone precious to you…?”

“I do…”

“Are you fighting for their sake?”

“No, that’s not it. My mom’s got nothing to do with this. I’m fighting for myself.”

“Your mom…? Is she your precious someone...?”

“Why the puzzled face? You should also have a mom who’s precious to you, right?”

“I don’t understand the idea of a mother being important to someone. I feel like I knew about this feeling a long time ago... but now I can’t remember…”

Mai’s eyes seemed unfocused for a moment, as if she was dreaming. As I stood next to her, my mind started going.

Mom… he means his mother, right...? The Maki Sonomura from the other world has a “mother,” and Kido also has a “mom”. When Inaba mentioned his “old woman” before, he meant his mother right?

My… My mother, what happened to her?

E-Erm… Did she die when I was little…? Or did I never have one from the start…? No, wait, that's biologically impossible, isn't it? So why can't I remember…? I don't have any memory. It's like a hole opened in my mind and the memories escaped through it.

This is all so terrifying…

It was then that I realized Mai was looking at me with a strangely mature and sympathetic gaze and… is that pity I feel? Why is she looking at me like that…?

"I understand… you're all unsure if things will turn out okay, but you believe in the future. And you all have something or someone you want to protect." Mai muttered. "I think you'll be able to do it. Save this world, and everything…"

Mai ran out of the gingerbread house, with us following right behind her. She made her way to the edge of the clearing and stopped in front of a tree, placing a hand in its trunk.

"I will open the path…!"

Right in the middle of the trunk, a wooden door suddenly appeared. Mai then twisted the knob with one hand, opening the door.

We could clearly see the scenery on the other side of the square-shaped door too. The sky was dark grey, and so were the buildings.

"Beyond this door lies the Dark Side… Aki has grown so powerful that I've lost all power over that part of the town. All of you, please be very careful…"

"What a surreal sight. Looks like it came right out of one of Magritte's paintings."

Inaba suddenly perked up.

"Oh, I know 'bout him. So Magritte also existed in this world, huh? The Sonomura from our world also really liked surrealist stuff. You may come from different worlds, but you've got similar tastes."

"Huh…? Ah, I suppose so."

I agreed with Inaba, but what he said didn't register with me.

I certainly said that it looked like "one of Magritte's paintings", but… I don't know anything about that. More importantly, what is Magritte? The name of an artist? I have no idea, so why did "Magritte's painting" suddenly come to my mind?

Something weird has been going on with me ever since this whole incident started. It's like my memories are a book and the pages have been nibbled by a bunch of bookworms. Sometimes, I feel uncertain of my very existence. But, why…?

I've never felt this uneasy before. I had fun every single day, without any worries. But now, I can't feel that familiar warmth I've grown so used to. If I'm not careful, I'll start having dark thoughts.

This is all so scary, it made me weak in the knees. Still, I forced those feelings down. Now's not the place or place to start whining.

"Let's go, Sonomura."

One by one, we all started to make our way through the door, with me taking the rear.

"Well then. See ya, Mai."

As I was about to pass through the door, Mai grabbed my hand tightly and stopped me.

"What is it?"

"...Ever since the world started to fall apart, many things fell out of my control. You too, are now acting out of your own free will. Maybe you becoming more than a puppet is the key to saving everything. So please, accept this. I'm sure it'll be useful."

As she said that, Mai placed a small round object in my hands. A compact…?

"I… have one that looks a lot like this."

"I know, but mine is a magic compact. It's incomplete, though. Aki stole half of its power before she created the Dark Side. Aki is looking for my compact. If it's complete, it'll be able to perform much stronger magic… Please, take care of this and don't lose it!"

"Yes, got it… Thank you."

I put the incomplete compact in my breast pocket.

"Oh yeah! Mai, you called me a puppet just now. Aki did the same thing before. What does it mean?"

When she heard my question, Mai started flapping her mouth in a panic.

"It's nothing! Nothing you should worry about. Please… go. I have to close the passage before any monsters come inside."

"But…"

As I hesitated, Mai pushed me in the direction of the door.

"Sonomura?"

Someone called my name from the other side.

"Coming!"

I started climbing through the portal.

"Mai, please wait for us here. We'll be back, I promise!"

The passage closed with a click behind my back.

Interlude ～white paradise～

I was born from the anguish of the Real One.

For a long time, the Real One's heart has been hurt, weak, and scared of everything. Many things that happen in the outside world always end up causing her anguish. Her heart was so weak that it couldn't even create armor to protect it. And so, I was born with many powers so that she could support herself. I was able to take in all of the painful and bad things.

There's another me inside of myself. Her name is Aki. She embodies all the dark things that the Real One wanted to push somewhere else. Sometimes Aki comes out to the surface and does mischief, which is why I sealed her away.

In order to combat the loneliness inside of the Real One's heart, I created a Paradise by using the magic compact.

First, I created light. When you create light, an equal amount of darkness is also created. However, the Real One dislikes darkness, so I exiled it away to the other side of the door.

After that I created heaven and earth, and placed a school and a town on top of the earth. I filled the school with people according to the Real One's memories and only created places in town that she would like. All the sinful places as well as places that would stir bad memories were replaced by gardens and beautiful plazas.

Lastly, I created a puppet in the Real One's image. After that, the puppet became the manager of the entire Paradise. She doesn't know it, but this Paradise was created for her sake and everything revolves around her.

She doesn't know of pain or suffering, only of joy and brightness. That's how I created her. By synchronizing the Real One's heart with the puppet's heart, the Real One can feel comfort. Making the Real One happy makes me glad, and so I always made sure that the puppet was having fun inside the Paradise.

But the Original's heart was deeply sad, and she wasn't satisfied with the people I created. Therefore, I made a wish to the magic compact: that it called the person from the outside who makes her the most happy. I wished really hard, so hard that the Original's condition worsened.

At the time, I wondered if I did something bad. But since my wish was something that her heart wanted, I kept wishing. All the things that the Original wants are good things.

And so, my wish came true.

From the outside world, the person she longed for and the person she was closest to were invited to Paradise. Their names are “Naito” and “Chisato.” I breathed a sigh of relief thanks to that. For a while, the Paradise kept enjoying peaceful days.

But one day, a hole opened in the Paradise’s walls. While I was too astonished to do anything, several men wearing white clothes and a single man wearing black clothes entered the Paradise.

The presence of the men in white surprised the inhabitants. They walked around, saying various things and causing an uproar. But the man in black kept his mouth shut as he took in every single thing about the Paradise while he walked around, looking as if he was thinking of something.

I was spying on them from the center of the garden. I thought that if I left them alone, they would leave eventually. The men visited the Paradise many times, especially the one in black. All the times he visited, he would come to my flower garden. He always had a smile on his face when he would talk to me.

That man was called Kandori and he asked me to “explain how this Paradise works.” While I would stay quiet, he would talk about a variety of stuff. He knew many things about the Paradise, where it was similar and where it was different from the outside world.

He also knew about the puppet.

He told me,

“I believe I already know whom this Paradise was made, and why. However, I cannot yet grasp the power used to create it. This place’s administrator is probably you, correct? If so, would you mind telling me how you created this Paradise?”

As I listened to him, I got confused. I never thought an adult from the outside world would be interested in the Paradise.

It was not exactly something I believed in myself, but something that Original believed in, and so I did too. She never thought she could fit in the outside world, even now. Since no one could truly understand her, she decided that no one would be interested in trying to.

As I wondered what to do, I looked at the man’s face.

He was staring at me intently. He was smiling, but his eyes were different from anyone's I've met so far. As he stared at me, his eyes seemed to be drawn somewhere else.

I could feel a bad aura. The same aura as those "eyes" that I locked on the other side of the door long ago. As soon as I noticed that, I tried to get away from him.

However, "something" inside of me felt attracted to his gaze and my legs didn't move. At that moment, my vision suddenly darkened and I crouched down involuntarily. This had never happened before.

But soon I started feeling better. When I raised my head, there was a girl who looked like me standing there. Wearing black clothes and a black ribbon on her hair, it was Aki, the one I had sealed before.

I was astonished. I mean, she shouldn't have enough power to break the seal by herself.

Aki was really angry because I had sealed her. She faced me and said,

"This time I'll seal *you* and do whatever I want! I'll tear this Paradise apart!"

She broke my necklace and tried to steal the magic compact. I tried protecting the compact with all my might. Finally, the compact separated into two parts and we each had one. At that point, the Paradise also divided itself into two.

If the Paradise is split, Original's mind is split as well. If this goes on, her mind will eventually break apart. Two Paradises can't fit into one heart.

Aki went with the black-clothed man to the other side of the Paradise. I couldn't figure out what to do.

A butterfly-masked person came to talk to me. They had manifested inside the Paradise without me realizing it, but they had been watching it for a long time. They were called "Philemon" but I had no idea what kind of person they were.

Philemon told me that I didn't have the power to fight Aki as she was. She had obtained a dark power and become much stronger. He told me,

"You have the power to protect with purity, but not to face the darkness. Only those who know darkness have the power to stand up against it."

And so, I once again wished strongly for something. Not for the Original's sake, but a wish of my own.

"Please, someone, help me. Someone, please save this Paradise before the Original is broken apart…"

As I made my wish, the Paradise's ground trembled once. I did not know what caused it. When that happened, cracks started to form in the Paradise's sky, showing the outside world. I could see people there.

They were wearing the school's uniform and were looking at me with surprised faces. I cried for help to them. In an instant, the cracks fixed themselves and I couldn't see the outside world anymore.

But I also realized that, at that moment, the puppet had also disappeared from Paradise. It was impossible for her to go somewhere without me knowing. I was scared and had no idea what to do. That's why I hid myself inside of the passage connecting Paradise to the outside world.

While I watched, people from the outside world crossed the path three times, all unconscious.

The first one was a tall boy with a scar on his forehead. I transported him to the Paradise's school.

The second one was an old man wearing white. He was about to fall through the edges of the passage, but before I could help him, Aki and Kandori appeared and took him with them.

The third time was a group of schoolboys, and the puppet was with them. I was happy that the puppet had come back, but I didn't know what to do with the boys. And so, I sent them all to the Paradise's school.

After that, they, with their own power and Philemon's guidance, came to visit me at the Lost Forest. I decided to believe in them and unsealed the path to the Dark Side, Aki's Paradise.

They really are the people I wished would come and save the Paradise, aren't they…?

For now, all I can do is pray. Please, save the Paradise before the Original breaks apart. Her heart, which only knows suffering, is very fragile and dangerous. Please, save the pitiful Original.

Please, please, I beg of you…

Dark Side ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

"This is probably… the subway terminal."

Leaving the portal, the sight that greeted me was the entrance to the subway terminal, which was blocked by a rusty metal shutter. The asphalt on the ground had also seen better days, and was now full of cracks. When I looked over my shoulder, the portal we came from was already gone.

Ashen grey clouds hang low in the sky, and because of that I can't tell whether it's day or night. It's so dark I can't see the buildings very well, but many of them seem broken down and about to collapse. It hardly feels like somewhere people would live.

I took about two-three steps before my foot hit something. What's… this?

A broken, rusty metal plate stood by my feet. On it, the words "Mikage-cho Subway Station" were painted.

I can't believe it…

Not long ago, this part of the town used to be so colorful and lively. This is so shocking and overwhelming it fills me with dread.

"This is the Dark Side, huh?" Inaba grumbled, looking around. "What a dim place. Totally not my jam."

"Who asked for your opinion?" Jay quipped. "Anyway, we gotta look for that Aki girl. Wouldn't it be faster to ask around? Mai said that the Dark Side is Aki's Paradise, so shouldn't she be a big name around here?"

"A simple plan, but it seems effective." Nanjo said, and then turned his head towards me. "Sonomura, is there a place nearby where it would be reasonable for people to gather?"

"Hm… let me see… in the past, there was the arcade in Joy Street, which was close to this subway station. It was the busiest place around here, but things have changed so much I dunno if it's still there."

"Oh. So there's a Joy Street in this world too?" Inaba commented, a happy tune in his voice. "Y'know, hearing these familiar names makes me happy, almost nostalgic even."

I stared at him, amazed.

"W-What is it, Sonomura?"

“Uh… I was just thinking about how carefree you are. You can keep being happy-go-lucky even in the middle of this desolate town.”

“My bad, I just get carried away easily.”

Looking sullen, Inaba starts walking away.

“Hey, don’t go on ahead by yourself!” Nanjo called out. “Do you even know which direction to go?”

“Oh, stuff it. If there’s a Joy Street here, it would be at the same place, no? Dark Side or not, this world is still similar to ours, right?”

“I’m saying that you can’t go alone by yourself in this world where you don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Annoyed, Nanjo went after Inaba. Jay and I followed them, walking side by side.

Jay was quiet but kept glancing at me as if he wanted to say something.

“Uh, yes? Is something wrong?”

“Not really, but… Sonomura, did you mean what you just told Inaba?”

“You’re asking… if I mean it? Yes, I do. What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s okay. Forget it.”

“No, tell me. I’m curious now.”

“Hm… this is just a thought, okay. I think that attitude of his must be his persona.”

“Persona? You mean like the gods living inside us?”

“Oh no, no. Sorry, it was bad wording on my part. I meant personas as in masks. I think Inaba acts happy-go-lucky in dangerous situations on purpose.”

“...? I don’t get it. Why would he do that?”

“To overcome his fear. And even if he tries to stop it, joking around is already stuck to his core so I don’t think it’ll be easy for him to change. Wait… where did Kido go?”

“I’m here.”

We both jumped in surprise. Kido was right behind Jay, walking silently.

“Whoa. Don’t scare me like that, man. Give a dude a warning if you’re gonna walk behind them without making any noise.”

“I walk the way I want to. Deal with it.”

“You’re not one to waste words, are you?” Jay side-eyed Kido. “If you don’t use your words more often, you’ll end up forgetting how to talk.”

As the boys had their conversation, I was thinking about Jay's words from earlier, about overcoming fear. Is this the same as when I tell myself to cheer up when things are bad? So… even though Inaba always seems happy on the outside, he's fighting his own inner battles just like me?

"Hey, Jay…"

"Yes?"

"Are you also fighting against something inside your heart?"

"I can see you're not the type to beat around the bush. That's right. I'm feeling so tired of all this, I want to run away back to my world and go to sleep in my bed. Whenever we run into a demon, I'm so scared that I want to run away as fast as I can."

"And how do you fight those feelings?"

"I pretend I'm not feeling them. Put on a poker face and act like it's not fazing me at all. Eventually, I'll actually start feeling that way. Fake it till you make it, y'know? Doesn't work all the time, though."

"Hmm…"

The city around us is still dark, but somehow I feel like it's brighter. As if… I can now see something clearly that I couldn't before. Is this what they call an epiphany?

"This is so… fascinating. Humans… everyone… they're all so fascinating. I feel like I'll be able to understand everyone much better than before now."

In response, Jay looked at me with a puzzled look.

"You say some pretty *off* stuff yourself from time to time. If anything, *you're* the most fascinating person here. Ah, right after Inaba of course."

"That's Joy Street. Look, you can see the arcade's yellow roof from here."

I pointed at it with my finger.

"Ah, it's practically the same Joy Street from our world." Inaba said, sizing up the building. "Except… it gives a totally different vibe."

"Yes, it's quite different from even the Joy Street I knew too."

The Joy Street I knew had a flower bed by the entrance, which was always filled with flowers of the current season. The floor was made out of multi-colored tiles and there was no trash on the ground. It was a place where anyone could have fun, buy stuff, drink

whatever herbal tea was in fashion, and a bunch of other stuff. Because of that, it was always full of people living their best lives.

But why does it look so desolate? The dark aura around it is almost palpable.

The walls and support pillars are dirtied by graffiti, and the marble monument that stood by the entrance next to the flower bed is now just a pile of rubble.

“There’s no sign of life anywhere. Either way, let’s try investigating.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Side by side, we entered the mall. As soon as we stepped in, we heard a crashing sound like that of thunder.

“What was that sound just now?”

“Sounded like thunder. Did it start raining?”

Jay tried going outside to check, only to immediately turn around and come back.

“H-Huh…? Didn’t I just go outside?”

“What are you talking about? You turned around and came back yourself.”

“No, that’s not it. I’m sure I tried going outside just now, but...”

“What are you whining about? Here, I’ll try going out myself.”

Inaba power walked towards the exit. But he soon came back, the same way he went. He looked flabbergasted.

“E-Eh? Why did I come back here?”

“See? I told you.”

“If one tries to exit, they’ll just turn around like they bounced off a mirror.” Nanjo observed, calmly. “It would seem like we are trapped in here.”

“Argh! Again!?” Inaba gave out an exaggerated shout.

“Using the same tactic over and over, she really is just a child. A child that doesn’t get bored of playing the same game again and again.” Nanjo said, now struggling to not let any emotion show in his face. “Well, let’s accept the fact that we’ve been trapped. More importantly, we should go back to our original goal of finding this city’s inhabitants so we can obtain information.”

“Hey, Nanjo… you always seem very composed but…”

“Yes? What is it, Sonomura?”

“I’m thinking… is that your persona, your mask?”

Nanjo furrowed his brows and looked at me with an irritated face.

“What are you talking about? I am not wearing any mask.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Sheesh... this is annoying. Did you seriously not understand what I said at all?”

But I didn’t get the chance to hear Nanjo’s reply.

“So-no-mu-ra! Hurry up, we need to investigate.” Inaba called out to me. “By the way, I’m hungry. Is there a place here that sells food?”

“Eh, I dunno. The Joy Street from the past used to have a lot of places that sold food. But none of them seem to be open right now…”

Urged on by Inaba, we made our way into Joy Street.

Unfortunately for Inaba, the current Joy Street didn’t have any food shops open.

In fact… there are hardly any shops open at all.

Dozens of shops have their shutters closed but around four-five of them have the lights on, indicating that they are still operating.

However, we didn’t see any people walking around outside the shops. The only person we found was an old man crouched down, covered in a ragged cloth.

We tried to gently shake him awake in order to ask a question, but he just yelled “Long live the Queen!” out of nowhere and instantly fell asleep again. It’s like he didn’t even notice we were there. Was he drunk…?

“Oh, there’s a Satomi Tadashi here! The manager really keeps the shop open come hell or high water.”

“Look, it even says ‘Dark Side Branch’ under the signboard. Did he paint that himself? He’s pretty gutsy to have the shop open in a shabby place like this.”

Once Jay noticed the shop, we all rushed to it. “Satomi Tadashi” is the name of a drugstore chain, and the son of this store’s manager is a student at St. Hermelin.

“Hey, that looks like a Peace Diner right next door. Is it open…?”

If I remember correctly, the shop next to the pharmacy should be a Peace Diner, but it looks completely different.

“It doesn’t seem like it’s a Peace Diner anymore. The v-sign[14] on the logo is even vandalized.”

[14] The v-sign is known as “peace sign” in Japan.

“But it still looks like it’s open.” Inaba said. “I think I can hear people talking inside, and the lights are on. Let’s go inside.”

Inaba entered the store and the rest of us followed. the eyes of everyone inside turned to us.

As we stepped inside, the heads of all the patrons turned in our direction.

They stood there, watching us silently, not moving from whatever position they were in before.

This place… gives me a bad vibe. It’s as if the very air inside the store had frozen up.

Inaba ignored it all. He walked over to the counter and started talking to the person who seemed like a clerk.

“Let’s see, I’ll have a burger and some fries.”

“Sorry kid, we’re out of it.”

“Then what do you have?”

“You guys are new, right? Look, this here is the Black Market, and one one can leave without the Queen’s permission.”

“Tch! Who the hell is this Queen!?”

“The ruler of the Black Market, our eternal lover, the Harem Queen. Those who step inside this market become the Queen’s prisoners for all eternity. Since you’re now here, you should give her your greetings as soon as possible.”

After saying his peace, the clerk walked over to another customer.

Whatever spell the patrons had been under was broken, and they resumed whatever they were doing before. I could breathe more easily now.

Inaba clicked his tongue, pissed off.

“This place is weird.” Jay remarked. “The clerk is rude and the customers look like thugs. The mood in here is terrible.”

“True…” Nanjo agreed, his brow furrowed. “If possible, I’d like to leave this place as soon as possible.”

I nodded.

And then… I felt someone poke my arm.

“Eh?”

Looking over my shoulder, I only see Kido with his usual unreadable expression.

“What is it, Kido?”

“It wasn’t me. It was… that.”

Kido pointed at something with his leg.

Looking down, I see a small snowman standing at my waist level and wearing a blue hat.

When did this thing show up?

“A snowman? Why is this doing here?”

As I stood there confused, the snowman started talking.

“Hee-ho♫ Hey miss, my name is Jack Frost.”

“Wah! It talked!”

“Miss, do you wanna use the photo booth? Do you wanna?”

The snowman grabbed my hand and pointed to one corner of the store, where there stood a large box-shaped machine.

“W-What’s a photo booth…?”

“A photo booth is... a photo booth.” Inaba sounded like he was struggling to find an explanation. “It takes your photo and then prints it out on a sticker. Don’t they have any in this world? Oh wait, there’s one right here, duh. Did you not know about them, Sonomura?”

“Ah, no. I didn’t know… about these things.” I said, looking at the booth. “It’s the first time I’ve heard of them.[15] It probably wasn’t here before the city was split into two. It seems there’s a lot of stuff about the Dark Side that I don’t know about.”

Next to this “photo booth” thing there were multiple photo stickers glued to the shop’s wall, decorating it.

I wasn’t paying much attention to the faces of the people on it, but then I noticed a familiar face.

“Hey, that’s… Chisato!?”

It was a very small photo, around 3x2 cm, and the image quality wasn’t very good either. But there’s no doubt that the person in that photo is Chisato Kasai, my friend who had disappeared from the other side of the city.

“Hey, little snowman, do you know where this girl is!?”

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[15] Photo booths were first introduced in Japan in 1995, under the name “Print Club.” In Japanese, *Purinto Kurabu* (プリント倶楽部) which was shortened into *purikura*. Technically, the name *purikura* is trademarked by Atlus (yes, really. They pioneered photo booths in Japan) but it’s colloquially used nowadays to refer to photo booths of any brand.

“Don’t call me a snowman. Jack Frost is a much cooler name. And just to make it clear, my name isn’t *Purikurataro*[16] either! Hee-ho♫ Anyway, which girl are you talking about?”

The snowman seemed grumpy, but he still looked at the photo I was pointing at.

However, he started trembling all over once he saw the subject of the photo.

“Hee-ho!? I-I don’t know! I’ve never seen this girl in my life.”

“But her photo is right there! She must’ve used the photo booth.”

“I said I don’t know, so I don’t know! Hee-ho!”

The snowman ferociously dashed over to the counter, jumped over it, and hid on the other side.

“What was that all about?”

It seems like none of us could process what happened, and we all watched flabbergasted as the snowman ran away.

“Why did he run away? No, wait… this at least confirms without a doubt that Chisato is somewhere in here.” I turned towards the guys. “I have to look for her. She must be feeling so scared, all alone in a place like this. Not to mention Naito is worried sick about her. Will you guys help me?”

“This here really is Chisato Kasai.” Jay said, shocked. “A bunch of people are splitting hairs over her disappearance, and here she is taking a picture at a photo booth. She’s really something else.”

“Do you want to meet this person?”

One of the customers standing next to us asked that question. He must’ve been drunk since his eyes were a bit glassy, but he still gave the impression of a kind old man.

“Do you know this girl, mister!?”

“There’s no one in this town who doesn’t know this girl.”

“So do you know where she is right now!?”

“Well, if you want to know where she is you should ask the Queen.”

After saying that, the man laughed gloomly.

“It seems that we have to meet this Queen either way.” Nanjo remarked, folding his arms.

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[16] *Purikurataro*: From *purikura* and “Taro” (common Japanese male name/suffix for male names). As *purikura* is an Atlus property, Jack Frost was also used as its mascot character. High school girls unfamiliar with *Megami Tensei* quickly nicknamed him *Purikura-kun* (プリクラ君).

“A Queen, huh.” Inaba tilted his head. “Hope she’s not the kind that carries a whip around.”

“Hey, old man!” Jay called out. “Where do we go to meet this Queen?”

“Turn around the corner at the clinic and go into the alley. Then you’ll reach the Queen’s Kama Palace. Watch your mouths around the Queen, she’s incredibly haughty. Those who failed to treat her with respect weren’t allowed to live in the Black Market, but they weren’t kicked out either.”

“Then, what happened to those people?”

The man looked at me right into the eyes.

“Just to make it clear, you guys didn’t hear anything from me.”

After saying that, the man hurried to the closest table and sat down.

“Let’s go, Sonomura. I’m getting sick just by looking at them. They all look terrible.”

“Yes… I agree.”

We all left the shop. This time, Kido was at the front so he was the one to open the door.

“Chisato…” I whispered to myself. “I’m definitely going to save you!”

Since it was the entrance to a palace, I imagined a luxurious door, but in reality it was made out of simple metal. And it was rusty to boot.

“Is this *really* the place?”

Jay eyes the door with suspicion as he grasps the doorknob.

“When I heard this was a palace, I imagined more security than... this.” Nanjo, who was standing next to me, commented. ”Surely the door must at the very least be locked?”

However, his prediction turned out incorrect as the door opened up easily and without any resistance.

We timidly went inside, and it was clear that the interior, unlike the door, truly was fit for a palace.

The walls were white and decorated with gold and red fringes. On the ceiling there were tulip-shaped chandeliers and the colored light bulbs were emitting light red as a rose. On the ground, a large crimson carpet extended from the entrance all the way to the staircase and continued downstairs.

The contrast made us speechless, to say the least.

“We won’t get in trouble just by walking around, are we? I mean, will the Queen jump out of nowhere yelling ‘you philistines’ at us or something like that?”

“Well, we gotta move forward. The door was open and there’s no guards. There’s no one at the entrance to welcome us or give us info.”

Jay took the lead, walking on the carpet. The rest of us followed him.

The carpet covered the entire staircase and went down and down, seemingly with no end. The stairway connected to many corridors which were decorated in different colors like white, golden, and amber.

It all looked very regal, but there was an endless amount of twists and turns. In the end, I have no idea if we’re walking in the right direction.

“How deep does this stairway go?” Inaba grumbled.

“All the way to the Earth’s core, I’m willing to bet,” Nanjo said, voice dripping with irritation.

And so we went, someone complaining every once in a while.

I don’t know how long it took, but we eventually reached a massive double door. The corridor ended right on that door, so there were no other paths.

“Is this the last stop…?” I sighed, looking at the door.

The white door was decorated with carvings of roses and vines, the brass knob giving a dull shine underneath the light of the chandelier.

“Let’s open it.”

Inaba and Jay stepped forward, each opening one side of the double doors.

“...!!”

The scene on the other side made me gasp out loud.

It was an enormous hall. So big, it seemed more like an extremely large corridor, extending so far I couldn’t see the end from here.

But what surprised us the most wasn’t the size of the room, but instead the many stone statues inside. Lifesize statues of people, the dark stone shining under the light. There are so many cramped together that you’d have to dart between them.

“Amazing… are those statues made of obsidian?”

“I dunno the name of the stone, but doesn’t it look like the stuff used to make tombstones?”

Inaba was right. All those statues the color of dark granite side by side look like tombstones. It's like I'm trapped in a strange cemetery without any exits, and a shiver runs down my spine.

Still feeling creeped out, we began exploring the hall.

"Hey, there's a door on this side. Looks like this is the only way out."

We all nodded at Jay.

But for real, brushing against those statues as we walk by is really creepy. I'm so glad none of us is going through this alone.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here!"

Jay smiled at my shout of encouragement.

"You're made of stronger stuff than you look like, Sonomura."

I smiled back at him.

We headed towards the door, making our way through the statues, being careful not to hit any of them.

"Welcome to the Kama Palace!"

After leaving the hall of statues, we were warmly greeted by a voice.

Surprised, we turned towards the direction of the voice and saw a young man standing there.

He wasn't very tall, but his delicate features and beautiful maroon hair complemented each other nicely. He was wearing a shining silk blouse and black pants. It kinda gives him a fairy tale Prince Charming vibe.

It was then that I realized there were actually five or six young men in the room. They look so similar I can't really tell the difference.

Well, they're all different when it comes to hair color, eye color, height and whatnot, but they all give out the same aura. It feels like they're copies of one another.

They're all smiling, but their eyes look kinda unfocused, as if they're sleeping with their eyes open. They might all be very beautiful and well-groomed, but I can't help but think of them as really creepy.

"Have you come here to seek an audience with Her Majesty?" One of the men wearing a frilly blouse asked us.

“That’s right. We came to ask the Queen for permission to leave this place. We also want to ask about a person we’re looking for. Will the Queen, or anyone else really, be able to see us soon?”

The man nodded his head with an exaggerated gesture.

“Of course, of course! Her Majesty is as beautiful as she is generous. She is the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Look, see those beautiful pictures decorating the walls? They were painted by none other than Her Majesty herself! She is completely flawless at everything she does…!”

I looked at the pictures that decorated each wall in this room. They were multiple oil paintings in gorgeous elaborate golden frames. When I looked at them, I froze.

Because… I know those pictures.

I know who painted them.

That artist is…

But the young man seemed to misunderstand me, as he nodded his head with gusto.

“They’re so splendid you’re at a loss of words! What about you, gentleman?”

This time the man directed his words to Jay, who was silently inspecting the pictures next to me.

“I think they suck.” Jay said over his shoulder.

As he heard those words, the young man became flustered.

“W, what are you saying!? There’s something wrong with your eyes!”

“Nah, I agree with Jay.” Inaba said, full of gusto himself. “Like, they’re pretty and all that but I can feel no personality behind them. They’re not that great.”

The princely young man’s face turned blue and he became speechless.

“We don’t have time to spend admiring trash. Will the Queen meet with us or not?” Nanjo asked the man, his tone irritated.

The man trembled all over as he silently pointed at a door opposite from the one we just entered from.

“Let’s go, Sonomura.” Jay told me.

I was staring fixedly at the pictures on the walls up until now, but Jay’s words snapped me out of it. I quickly nodded back at him.

Outside the room there was another short corridor, with large double doors at the other end. It must be the Queen’s chamber.

“Those guys were so creepy.” Inaba said as we walked down the corridor.

“You tell me. It was just a bunch of rehearsed crap. Those guys looked like clockwork dolls or something. Sonomura…? Something wrong?” Jay peered at me. “Your face is really pale. Did they creep you out that much?”

“Oh no, that’s not it. It’s just… well, it’s about the paintings in that room…”

“Aaah, those lame paintings. What about them?”

“I’ve seen them before. The themes… the style… they’re identical to Chisato’s, but what does this all mean…?”

The guys all stared at each other silently. The first one to open their mouth was Nanjo.

“In others words, if we take in account the testimony from the people in the bar we arrive at one hypothesis…”

“What hypothesis, Nanjo!? This Queen is taking the credit for Chisato’s paintings, right? She is safe, right!?” I asked Nanjo, hounding him. He seemed to hesitate and looked away.

“Forget it. What I’m thinking of is just a possibility. We’ll know the truth once we meet the Queen.”

“Huh!? Why won’t you tell me? Speak up, now I’m curious!”

As I kept hounding Nanjo, Jay approached me from behind.

“Nanjo is right. We’ll know everything once we meet with the Queen. Let’s hurry up, Sonomura.”

Is that… pity on Jay’s eyes?

“What is going on? Do all of you know what Nanjo’s thinking about? Why won’t any of you tell me?”

In response, Jay shrugged.

Did everyone realize something and they’re hiding it from me?

But why…?

“Who goes there!?”

A sharp voice asked from the other side of the door.

We didn’t have the time to react in surprise as the big double doors started to open on their own. A group of young men rushed out from the doors and surrounded us. They had the same general characteristics of the men in the previous room, right down to their auras.

“Bring them to me.” Said the same voice from before.

The young men who were surrounding us obeyed their orders and ushered us inside.

“Sounds to me like these fuckers want their teeth smashed in…” Kido said in a grave voice as he raised his fists towards one of the princely young men, who paled and took a step back in fear.

“Keep it down Kido, there’s no reason to fight these idiots.” Jay said. “The Queen wants to see us, so let’s just go.”

In the end, we all went quietly in the room.

It was larger and more luxurious than any of the rooms we had seen in the palace. A chandelier hangs from the high ceiling and the fluffy carpet on the floor goes up to my ankles. In the four corners of the room there are black statues like the ones we saw in that room earlier. The walls were decorated with various pictures in the same style as the ones from before.

“What do you think of my palace? Wonderful, isn’t it?”

From the back of the room, separated from us by a thin lace curtain weaved with golden thread, the same voice from before spoke.

That voice sounds very familiar to me.

But… it can’t be…

The lace curtains were drawn up and a figure emerged from behind.

A slender young woman wearing unusual clothes.

“Chisato…? It’s you, Chisato! You really were here!”

I tried running to her, but the men from before stopped me.

“Hey, move aside! You’re in my way!”

But no matter how much I shouted, they wouldn’t budge.

“It’s useless, they only obey my orders.” Chisato said slowly, her voice dripping with ice.

“Chisato…?”

I stared at Chisato, unblinkingly.

She was wearing an exotic-looking dress in red velvet rimmed with gold as well as a headdress that made her look like Cleopatra.

But looking at her face made me freeze.

“Chisato… your face…”

But I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Chisato's face was covered in moles, some of them big enough to look like bruises, and others were small but still numerous enough to look like freckles. They covered her whole face and I could barely see any trace of her usual flawless, unblemished skin.

Just what had happened to her?

"My face? Is there something wrong with it?" Chisato frowned at my words.

She then rushed to a large gold-framed mirror on the wall nearby and looked into it. However, her reflection didn't show any blemish.

"There's nothing wrong with it. I'm the fairest of all, just like always. Ah, I see. I've become so beautiful that you're taken aback, right Maki!?"

Chisato let out a big guffaw.

"Oh, and look who we have here, Maki's cute little posse." Chisato sneered, her voice full of scorn. "You must have more guts than I expected to come all the way here."

"Who are you calling a posse, you weirdo?" Inaba shouted angrily. "We thought you had disappeared, and here you were playing queen!"

Hearing that, Chisato's expression changed a little.

"You're not this world's posse, are you? Have you come from *my* world?"

"Took you long enough to notice, dummy."

"I already had my suspicions from the way that snowman reacted after seeing your photo." Jay said. "I dunno what you're after, but stop this stupidity and come with us. We're looking for a way back to our world."

"He's right, Chisato. Just what happened to you? Let's hurry out of this place and go back, okay?"

"Don't make me laugh!" Chisato spat out. "Why in the world would I want to go back to that shabby place!?"

"W, what are you saying, Chisato?"

Chisato immediately turned towards me, glaring.

"For goodness sake, don't you get it? Oh my God, you really don't. Okay, let me spell it clear for you: I already didn't like the Maki from my world, but you are even more insufferable. Always so full of pleasantries that I can't stand listening to you! The other you was so weak and meek like a mouse… you didn't speak up for yourself, so I thought you'd do okay as my underling, but noooo. Why!? Just why!? When we both entered that art contest together, your piece was chosen while mine was promptly rejected. When we

entered high school, even though you couldn't attend, the rumor mill was always talking about you like you were the prettiest girl in school. And you always looked like you didn't give a damn about it.

"That always drove me crazy! I wanted to scratch that face of yours with my nails! But even so, I was able to hold out. If someone so much as made a noise in your general direction, your face would become blue and you would have to be hospitalized. You had no friends, and had to rely on me for everything. You were so pitiful I decided to pretend to be your friend. And then, bam, I'm taken to a different world. And over here not only are you healthy, you're the damn school idol. I couldn't keep my bile down! And then… my angel came to save me."

Chisato smirked, as if remembering something particularly pleasant. She was ranting like an obsessed madwoman, and yet I couldn't look away.

"My angel appeared before me while I was rotting away in that boring town and told me she'd give me a magic mirror that could grant me any wish. I'd do anything to leave that town, I didn't think twice. Well, I'd be lying if I said the prospect of a mirror that can grant any wish didn't interest me at all. The angel kept her promise and now I can do whatever I want! Endless praise, unpaired beauty, hot guys… they're all mine. Mine, and no one else's!"

"B, but Chisato… what about Naito? He's been worried sick about you all this time…!"

That was the only thing I managed to croak out.

However, it only managed to make Chisato laugh even harder.

"Naito!? I don't need that loser anymore! I only started dating him because I knew *you* had a crush on him! Telling the other you about my dates with him while you were looking half-dead in a hospital room was *so much fun*! Hearing you whisper 'I hope I can get a wonderful boyfriend too' in that whispery voice of yours was like music to my ears. But guess what, I don't need to do it anymore!"

Chisato guffawed loudly, the laughter rising from her chest.

I don't even know from where to begin processing what she's saying.

Chisato is mixing up the Maki Sonomura from her world and me, going back and forth about both of us as if we were one and the same… and it's very clear that she hates both of us.

It was then that I finally realized it. I always knew this Chisato came from another world, but it finally hit me that she isn't the same person I went to middle school with.

My chest… hurts. So very much. It's a pain I've never felt before.

I'm not hurt anywhere. There's not a single wound or bruise anywhere in my body.

Yet… it hurts. It's like I've gotten an open wound oozing blood everywhere.

I've never felt this bad in my entire life.

"I… had no idea… y, you hated me that much..."

But it didn't seem like my words reached her ears. Chisato ignored me and walked over to Kido, who was at the back of our group, and placed a hand on his arm.

"So, what do you think of my paintings? Aren't they the best? Depending on your answer, I'll give you the honor of becoming my servant."

With an unpleasant expression, Kido shook off Chisato's hand.

"Don't touch me, you monster."

Chisato arched an eyebrow and stared at Kido.

"What did you just say!? You dare to call me a monster!? Someone as beautiful as me!? And to my face!?"

"I ain't talking about your looks. You're rotten inside, that's what makes you a monster."

"Whoa, nice one Kido. Y'know, I've never really liked Kasai but I had no idea she was this horrible. Is that why your paintings are so lame?" Inaba spat angrily at Chisato.

"This is a rare occasion, but Inaba is correct. A painting is a reflection of the artist's soul, so it's perfectly reasonable that a rotten person couldn't create a decent piece of art." Nanjo said with scorn dripping from his voice.

Chisato turned red with anger.

"N, Now you've done it! You asked for this!"

She rushed to the mirror and started yelling at it.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall! Turn these crude idiots into stone!"

Either as soon as Chisato finished talking or just before she did, a bright light shone from inside the mirror. It was so bright I had to cover my eyes. When I opened them, there were three black stone statues where Inaba, Nanjo and Kido were standing.

"Hehe. This Mirror of Falsehoods can grant any wish of mine, no matter what it is." Chisato said specifically to taunt me.

Looking at the cold stone statues, I suddenly realized something.

“That room earlier filled with statues… don’t tell me…”

“That’s right! I turned everyone who disagreed with me or was rude to me into statues!”

Looking at Chisato’s triumphant expression makes a shiver run down my spine.

She’s still supposed to be my friend Chisato Kasai, despite her strange outfit and her face full of moles… but right now I can only see a deranged woman who has lost her marbles.

“And what about you, Jay!?” Chisato turned to the only boy in our group that she hasn’t turned into stone yet, a cruel smile on her lips. “What do you think of my paintings? You’ll be a good boy and answer correctly, won’t you? For your own sake.”

“Open your eyes, Kasai. You’re being manipulated.”

In spite of the situation, Jay’s voice was really calm.

“Shut up, this is not what I want to hear!”

“Do you have any idea of what’s happening to your face?”

Jay’s words startled Chisato, who quickly turned to the Mirror of Falsehoods like before and looked at her own reflection. And just like before, her reflection in the mirror was spotless.

“You filthy liar. I’m not falling for low tricks like that.”

“It’s not a lie. Sonomura, can you please lend me your compact?”

I handed Jay my compact like he asked. He opened it and turned it towards Chisato, the round mirror aimed right at her face.

“Aaah!”

Chisato’s face froze up in an instant.

The small round mirror reflected her true face, not hiding the countless moles. She palmed her face in panic, and the woman in the reflection did the same.

“I, It can’t be… t, this is… me?”

Chisato murmured as she kept looking back and forth between the Mirror of Falsehoods behind her and the compact.

“This can’t be… the Angel would never lie to me… you’re using some kind of trick to deceive me…”

“I’m from the same world as you, remember? You confirmed it yourself. I don’t have any magic powers or charms or whatever else from this world.”

Jay’s words seemed to finally get through to Chisato.

She timidly raised her head and looked Jay in the eyes. Her eyes had been shining with madness before, but right now the light had faded from them.

“Then… the Angel did this to me? Oh my God… what should I do?”

Chisato fell to her knees before the Mirror of Falsehoods and curled up in a fetal position.

At that moment, the mirror let out a dull light. Its surface rippled like water and a young girl dressed in black jumped out from inside it.

“Aki! I knew you were behind all of this!”

I yelled at Aki as loud as I could, but she didn’t react. She could hear me without any problem, she was just choosing to ignore both Jay and I. Instead, she kicked Chisato with her small legs.

“Aah, just what are you doing? This is not how a Queen should act.”

Chisato raised her head and looked at Aki.

“Angel! You deceived me, didn’t you? Why did you put those moles on my face!? Why did you turn my face like this!? Explain yourself!”

Aki laughed happily at Chisato’s crumpled body on the ground.

“You’re a complete idiot! Nothing in this world is for free! Geez, it took you this long to notice, even though you’re already a grown up? You got a new mole on your face for every wish you made upon the Mirror of Falsehoods.”

“T, That’s too cruel…! It’s not fair!”

Chisato’s shoulders trembled in anger. At that moment, Aki’s expression changed. She began talking to Chisato with a gentle voice like the small child she appeared to be.

“But, you know, if those guys had never come here, you would have never noticed and you’d be able to keep living happily in peace.” Aki was now face to face with Chisato, whispering those words in her ear. “Everything is their fault. They’re the ones who destroyed your happiness. Take them out, Queen. Do it, and I’ll get rid of those moles on your face. I’ll give you a mirror that grants your wishes with no backdraws. Now… get rid of them!”

Slowly, Chisato stood up. Looking at her face, I raised my voice in surprise.

“Chisato…!”

Her face couldn’t be called human anymore.

Her skin was dark red and full of lumps, with eerie shining yellow eyes. Both her nose and lips had disappeared, leaving only the mouth behind. The mouth itself looked less like a

mouth and more like a slit that had been carved into a piece of rock, from which a violet tongue peeked.

As I stood frozen in place, Chisato's hair began to whip back and forth as if a strong wind was blowing. The hair made swooshing sounds as it cut through the air, and several strands turned into needles, which were then fired at me.

"Ah!"

In reflex, I covered my face and screamed.

However, the barrage of needles that should have hit me never hit its mark. As I lowered my arms, I saw a white dome of energy surrounding me, and in front of it were the needles that had hit the dome and fallen harmlessly to the ground. Above me stood my Persona, the phantasmagorical figure of a Megami[17] floating above me.

Seeing as her attack on me failed, Chisato tried her luck on Jay.

She raised both arms and growled like an animal. As she did so, a sphere of flame appears in the air and shoots straight at Jay.

Before it could hit him, Jay quickly shouted.

"Persona!"

In the next moment, the air was filled with an emerald green light and Jay's dark Deity materialized in the middle of it. With a gesture of its hand, the Deity summons a block of ice shaped like a fang. It flies towards Chisato, putting out the flames and hitting her directly.

"Aáâãäåāąæ!"

Chisâto gave out a beastly cry before collapsing on the ground.

Aki, who was standing next to the mirror as she watched the battle unfold, stomped on the ground angrily.

"Argh! You're so weak!"

Aki walked over to Chisato and pulled her up by the hair. Her face was still full of moles, but it had turned into a human face again.

"I hate weaklings like you! You know what? You're better off with this face! A stupid weakling like you deserves to look like this! Not like I ever cared about you anyway!"

Aki pushed Chisato aside violently.

Chisato didn't have any energy to react and instead started crying on the ground.

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[17] In the first Persona game, each Arcana corresponds to one specific demon race. For example, The High Priestess is Megami, and The Emperor is Deity.

“Aki, stop that, you little brat! You’re the one who provoked her in the first place, aren’t you? And now you’re throwing her away like she’s a toy you got tired of? That’s horrible! Unforgivable! I’ll make you pay for this!”

Surprisingly, Aki stopped pretending that Jay and I didn’t exist and turned around to face us.

“Sheesh, I’m tired of playing with you guys. I’m going back to the castle where my daddy is. Don’t even try following me, ‘cause it’s useless. Only daddy and I can go inside the castle. The only other person who can get inside is Mai with her other half of this compact here, but she’s too chicken to even take a single step here in the Dark Side, so in the end it all comes down to the same thing. You guys are never leaving this world, so better get used to wandering around forever.”

After she finished speaking, she took out a compact that had been broken in half from her pocket and chanted a weird spell.

“Eruaser Tsymmom! Take me back to the castle!”

In the next instant, Aki disappeared from where she was, leaving only the three statues and a crying Chisato with her face covered in moles behind. The Queen’s followers had fled as soon as the battle started. In the quiet room, the only sounds were those of Chisato’s sobs.

“Chisato…”

I walked over to her side, but didn’t know what to say.

The words Chisato said to me hurt so much I’ll never be able to forget them. But… even so… seeing her crying on the ground after having lost everything… I can’t muster up any kind of anger. Instead, I can only feel sadness along with the pain in my chest. Unable to find any words to say, I kneeled beside her.

“You’re thinking I deserve this, don’t you…?”

Chisato said, her voice coming out muffled since she was still covering her face with her hands.

“Eh?”

“You think I deserve this, don’t you Maki? You think that I’m awful, that I’m a monster…”

“That’s not true. I don’t think that, Chisato!”

“Don’t lie… that’s what I think too. I just got what I deserved…”

“That’s not true, Chisato. I’m sure there’s a cure. There must be. We’ll look into it together.”

“Don’t talk about things you don’t mean!”

Screaming, Chisato slammed both hands on the ground.

Her face was full of so much despair there was nothing else I could tell her.

“I wanna see Yosuke…” Chisato let out in a low murmur.

“I wanna see Yosuke one more time…” She repeated herself, this time a little louder.

At that time, the Mirror of Falsehoods started shining. In the next moment, Naito appeared before the mirror.

“Naito…!”

My surprised voice snapped Chisato out of her trance.

Once she saw Naito, Chisato once again covered her face and started crying.

Naito, of course, had no idea what was happening and looked completely lost. His mouth was gaping wide and he was looking around trying to make sense of the situation.

Once Naito noticed that Jay and I were here, he smiled in relief and started walking towards us while waving his good arm. But once he saw Chisato’s body on the ground his face turned serious.

“Chisato, is that you? Is… that, is that really you?”

Naito’s face then lit up with a smile at least ten times brighter than I had ever seen before.

“No, don’t come any closer!” Chisato let out a big shout while still covering her face. “Stay away from me!”

Naito was so surprised that he froze up.

“But why? What’s wrong, Chisato? It’s me, Yosuke! I was so worried about you, you have no idea how relieved I’m feeling right now…”

“No, you’re wrong. I’m not the same Chisato from before! I’m not her anymore! Don’t get any closer! Don’t look at me!”

Ignoring Chisato’s words, Naito kept walking towards her, crouched down and hugged her.

“What’s wrong, Chisato? Are you hurt?”

Chisato uncovered her face and slowly raised her head. Naito gasped in surprise.

“See? Just one look and you want to turn away. This is the new me. Forever! Get it now? Just let go of me already and move on. Forget about me…!”

Chisato once again covered her hands and started crying. She tried to twist herself out of Naito's hold, but he instead held her tighter.

"Yosuke…?"

"Chisato, I don't know what happened… but you must have suffered a lot, right? Don't worry, I'm here with you now."

"W, what are you saying Yosuke!? Don't you see how ugly I look...!?"

"I don't care about your face. You're you. I didn't fall in love with just your face."

Chisato forgot about covering her face and just stared at Naito as if he'd grown a second head. He returned her gaze without looking away.

"I don't care what you look like, I'm in love with *you*."

Naito's loud voice echoed in the empty room.

Crack!

A sound of glass breaking started echoing in the room. It gradually became louder and louder.

"What's that sound?"

I looked around, trying to find the source.

The sound was coming from the Mirror of Falsehoods. There were countless cracks on it, multiplying by the second. The image projected on its silver surface was distorted.

Crash!

The mirror then completely shattered in countless pieces.

"The Mirror of Falsehoods probably couldn't handle the reflection of a pure, honest heart…" Jay spoke to himself in a low voice.

"That… must be it… Naito really loves Chisato…"

I turned to look at the both of them.

When I looked at Chisato, who was gazing at the broken mirror shards on the floor, I noticed something really important.

"C, Chisato! Your face… your face is… back to normal!"

Upon hearing my words, Chisato started touching her own face, as if trying to feel if the moles were gone.

"It's true, Chisato!" Naito let out a cry of joy. "It's back to normal!"

I opened my compact and handed it over to a still perplexed Chisato. Her reflection in the small mirror showed her face just like it was before.

“No way… it can’t be… I’m… back? I’m back to how I was before!?”

She still didn’t seem to believe it and tears were shining in her eyes.

I moved without thinking, crouching by Chisato and holding her hands.

“Thank goodness… thank goodness, Chisato!”

She looked surprised at first, like she didn’t really register what happened, but soon her face morphed into a big smile.

But then, someone shouted from behind me.

“Ah! Sonomura, watch out! Don’t go near her!”

That was Inaba, wasn’t it…

Ah, I see! When the Mirror of Falsehoods was shattered, all the people who were turned into statues were turned back to normal!

“Ah, Inaba, you hatched. Nanjo and Kido too. I almost forgot about you guys.”

Despite his words, Jay was genuinely happy.

“Don’t call it *hatching*.” Nanjo shot back in irritation. “We were turned into stone, not enclosed inside eggs.”

“What he said. Do we look like chicken to you? And this isn’t the time to crack jokes… wait, is that Naito? Why is he here?” Inaba was pointing at Naito with a confused face.

“It seems like a lot has transpired while we were unavailable…” Nanjo said as he looked around the room.

“Well, about that…”

I tried explaining to them what had happened, however the ground started shaking with a heavy rumbling noise. It was so sudden, we all started panicking.

Automatically, we all looked at Chisato. When she noticed our gazes she started shaking her head quickly.

“I, it’s not me! It must be because the mirror broke, I didn’t do anything!”

“No, no one is blaming you.” I quickly answered her. “Since this is your palace we just thought you knew what was happening!”

Chisato started pondering, but meanwhile the rumbling sound started to get louder as the ground started to shake more.

“Oh no, I get it!” Jay raised his and looked at the ceiling.

Cracks were starting to show up there.

“If this palace was built with the mirror’s power, then when the mirror was shattered it started to crumble! Just like Kasai got turned back and everyone who got turned into statues was transformed back…”

Everyone paled and stared at the ceiling. The cracks were starting to widen.

“Run for it!”

I don’t know who exactly shouted that, but we all started to run.

We rushed through the many corridors and staircases like madmen. The room with all the statues was empty so it seems like the victims were one step ahead of us in running away.

“It’s the exit!”

Finally, after much running we arrived at the shabby metal doors we entered from.

My legs were already killing me, but I managed to power through the last spurt. As soon as we all escaped, the ceiling collapsed on top of the passage as if on cue.

A huge amount of dust flies out of the door, covering the area with a thick cloud of dust.

We all closed our eyes and covered our noses, coughing harshly. Eventually, things stopped trembling and the dust cloud started to settle, allowing us to see the area.

To our surprise, the entire place was abandoned.

I thought we’d be under the roof of the Black Market, but there wasn’t even a roof anymore, just ruins of what once used to be a building. We could see the usual grey sky of the Dark Side above us.

“D, did the market collapse together with the mirror too?”

“No, it was already like this when we came out, no? Maybe that Aki brat destroyed it on her way out? Like a child who got angry and kicked down a pile of building blocks.” Jay said with an annoyed voice.

“I wouldn’t put it past that child.” Nanjo, who managed to gather his cool first, added. “But more importantly... could someone tell me what happened after we were petrified?”

“Well, about that…”

I told them what had transpired.

“I see, so that girl named Aki is together with Kandori at some castle.”

“The question is, where would that castle be.”

“I know where it is.”

Chisato spoke up, interrupting Nanjo and Inaba’s conversation.

“Is that true, Kasai!?”

“Yes. Look, you can see the top of it from here.”

Chisato pointed her finger in a certain direction, and following it we could see, beyond many collapsed buildings, a place with a round roof.

“That’s pretty far from here.”

“The sooner we start heading there, the sooner we’ll arrive.”

“I agree. Aki’s mischief is only getting worse and worse. If things continue to escalate… I don’t even want to think about it.”

We all nodded.

“And you two?” Jay asked Chisato and Naito. “What are you going to do now?”

“Sorry, but I can’t go with you guys.” Naito answered without hesitation. “I’m going back to the school with Chisato. I don’t want her to get dragged into this more than she already has.”

Chisato didn’t say anything, but smiled coyly at Naito’s words.

“Okay, you guys do you.” Jay gave Naito’s shoulder a playful shove. “Once we find a way back to the other world, we’ll go meet you guys.”

“You guys please be careful. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“You take care of yourself too, Mr. Casanova!” Inaba said, giving Naito a noogie.

Meanwhile, I was saying goodbye to Chisato.

“See ya, Chisato. Hopefully soon.”

I said, extending my right hand. Chisato hesitated a bit, but grabbed and shook it.

“I’m… really sorry, Maki. I said horrible things to you. Once I go back to the other world, I’ll apologize to the other Maki too.”

I shook my head.

“No, that’s okay. Chisato, please be careful on your way back to the school.”

“Yes… thank you.”

Chisato was looking awfully sad and Naito was blatantly worried about her.

Seeing that made my chest warm and fuzzy.

Naito said that he’d love Chisato no matter what she looked like… I think it’s wonderful that the two of them managed to find someone who completes them so well. I can only hope I’ll be able to meet someone like that for me in the future.

“What’s wrong, Maki? Oh please, don’t cry.” Chisato said so, flustered.

It was then that I realized.

“I’m… crying?”

Warm tears were spilling down my cheeks.

“Tears are… warm? I didn’t know that.”

“Sheesh, Maki! There you go, saying stuff like that, you weirdo.”

Chisato laughed, her face on the verge of tears. I started laughing too, but the tears still wouldn’t stop. They kept flowing down my cheeks and dripped on the ground. Finally, I rubbed my tears and raised my head.

“Huh…? Are my eyes still hazy from the tears?”

But it wasn’t my eyes, Chisato’s body in front of me really was getting blurry.

“Maki…?”

She looked at me with a scared face.

“What’s going on!?” Naito yelled. The same thing was happening to him.

“W, what’s going on with you guys!?”

Everyone else panicked when they realized what was going on.

Their bodies became blurrier and blurrier before disappearing completely in a bright flash. A single white butterfly fluttered where they had been.

“Where did they go!?”

I yelled in a loud voice, startled.

“The curse on them has been broken.“

A voice that I remembered echoed from somewhere.

“Who’s there…?”

“Obsessions bind people. It creates a chain that binds together the one who obsesses and one who is obsessed. They managed to solve the problem of the obsession that they were on the receiving end of, all thanks to their own actions. As such, they returned safely to the other world.“

The voice seemed to be coming from the white butterfly.

“One curse has been broken. However, a much greater curse still covers this world, and it is also affecting the other world. You must break that curse. Please, hurry.“

It was then that I remember who this voice belonged to.

“You’re that masked person… Philemon, right?”

I asked the butterfly, but it stayed silent and simply flew away in the castle’s direction.

“Looks like it’s telling us to hurry up.” Jay said.

Following the butterfly, we began our trek towards the castle.

Interlude ～hell～

I slumber, watching a dream while also being half-awake.

The place where I'm in has existed even before man gave his species a name.

The place where I'm asleep is the very depths of hell. So deep that sunlight has never, ever reached this place.

Around me are those who wriggle at the bottom of hell like worms. They too are slumbering in this hell, dreaming while being half-awake.

They have no form, and no names.

Before long, they wake up and slowly ascend to places where light can reach.

At those times, they are called names like "greed," "arrogance," "betrayal," "falsehood," as well as "envy" and "killing intent."

They are hated by people, who refer to them as "evil" and "original sin."

The more one tries to hate them, the more one tries to turn their backs to them, the more deeply they stick. In places where human eyes cannot reach, they thrive and hold greater power.

As I sleep, I watch her dream.

She is weak, lacking in both wisdom and strength.

She hates reality.

She hates it, and yet yearns for it.

Torn between those two emotions, a crack formed in her mind, and from that crack I was born.

She turned her back to reality and created a false Paradise where she could play around. But behind the joy of creating that Paradise, there was also the wish to destroy it.

What's reflected on her eyes, which look at the beautiful fake Paradise and all its radiance, is the dream of the day in which it will be destroyed. The dream of ruin casts a shadow, and that only makes her Paradise's radiance brighter in comparison.

In order to protect the Paradise, she created various dolls. But their existences were fake, and so they held no real power. The reason is because the dolls didn't have true names.

As long as she keeps ignoring the dream of ruin, she has no real power.

As long as she keeps ignoring it, the dream of ruins keeps devouring her.

Once the dream of ruin has completely devoured her, I will fully awaken.

The real ruin has another name.

Its name is solitude.

Castle ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

On our way to the castle, we decided to take a short rest.

The place we're in had once been a park, and thankfully there was still one vending machine "alive." As such, we were able to buy drinks and sit down as we enjoyed our cans of juice and coffee.

"I still can't believe you forgave Kasai just like that." Inaba told me as he took a sip of his coffee. "If it were me, I don't think I'd be able to forgive someone who told me stuff like that so soon."

I thought about it.

"I guess so... to be frank, I haven't really forgotten about the stuff she told me. But at the same time, she wasn't the only one to blame. That Mirror of Falsehoods was created for the sole purpose of toying with people's hearts. I don't think that it only reflected falsehoods, but also distorted desires. And I think everyone has those deep inside, even me and you guys. It was Aki and the mirror who gave power to those desires, so I don't feel like it's fair to put all the blame on Chisato..."

I noticed that everyone was looking at me with surprise.

"I, is something the matter?"

"No, nothing." Jay smiled at me. "It's just… you've changed, Sonomura. At first you were more… how do I say it… simple. Like you were a preschooler, or something like that."

Okay, the preschooler part was uncalled for but I get where he's coming from.

"Yeah… I guess I've changed." I mumbled to myself. "But why? Maybe it's because I cried for the first time?"

"Wait wait, backtrack a little bit… you've never cried before!? Is that even possible? I mean, it sure isn't common!" Inaba said with an over-the-top surprised face.

"Is it really?"

"It is. When you said 'crying for the first time' did you mean 'in public'?"

"No, I meant in general. Is it really uncommon to not have any reason to cry? I mean, I've also never seen anyone cry up until now…"

Now they're looking at me with some really weird faces.

“Maybe the people of this world have… uh, special super strong lacrimal glands?”

“I guess…”

I’m at a loss of words.

It’s true, I’ve never cried before now.

I mean, up until now there wasn’t anything to cry over, nothing sad. Everything was so peaceful and happy…

Is crying really something so natural?

“I’d really appreciate it if we could stop gossiping and get a move on!” Nanjo said as he stood up.

Startled, I quickly finished drinking my juice.

The castle’s entrance looked like an amusement park’s.

There was an arched gate and various strange stone objects around. They were all colored in pastel colors and I couldn’t see them as anything other than toy blocks.

Wait, pastel colors?

It’s like a movie is playing out in my head.

A bright and clean room colored in pastel tones. A window facing the sound from which enters just enough sunlight. In the bed by the wall, someone is sleeping on a bed, their head resting on a white pillow…

And just as sudden as it started, the movie stopped.

What… was that?

I’ve never seen that room before… Why did it show up in my head?

“What’s wrong, Sonomura?”

I turned my head towards Jay, who was looking at me.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“If you say so. Okay then, we got here all fine and dandy, but the question is where we’re entering from.”

The pastel-colored gate was tightly shut. We tried both pushing and pulling, but it wouldn’t budge so we started looking around for clues.

“That brat said that we could only go inside if we had the other half of the compact from Mai, right? Shit, we gotta walk all the way back to the other side and get her help!?”

As Jay grumbled, I remembered that Mai had lent me her compact.

“Wait, I have it with me!”

I took it from my pocket.

“Since when do you have it?”

Jay looked at the compact, his face more flabbergast than impressed.

“Mai gave it to me when we parted ways. She even said it’d be of use, and she was right.”

“Hmm.” Jay narrowed his eyes a bit. “Y’know, that little girl looks a bit like you. Like you’re related or something. But, uh… how do we use this thing again?”

“I dunno.”

“Yeah, figured as much…”

Jay’s shoulders dropped, but then Inaba called us.

“Hey, what are the two of you doing over there? Come here and take a look at this!”

He was pointing at one object right next to the gate.

“Look, there’s a weird hole here.”

At first I thought it was some decorative piece of art, but its top was flat and there was an indentation where one could fit a round object. I compared it to the compact in my hand.

“Are we… supposed to fit this inside?”

I put the compact next to the hole, and it looked to be the same size and shape.

“Maybe. Let’s test it.”

Following Jay’s suggestion, I put the compact inside the hole. As soon as I did, the object started to sink.

“Ah…!”

Immediately after I let go of the compact, a hole opened up under the object and it retreated underground. And at the same time the gate opened with a clicking sound.

“So it really was the key.”

“But what do we do now!? It’s gone!”

The boys don’t seem to know how bad what just happened was.

“That compact had magic powers, and if Aki were to combine it with her other half, she’d become even more powerful. That’s why Mai told me to never hand it to Aki! She told me that, but I still…!”

“I see… so that was her goal.” Nanjo said, looking frustrated.

“Then we’re getting it back.” Jay said as if explaining something really simple. “Let’s go! If the gate unlocked, that means she’s inviting us in. I dunno what she’s planning, but we only have one thing we can do.”

“Yes, we can’t afford to slow down for grieving.” Nanjo nodded.

“Then what are you doing standin’ still over there? The gate’s already open, let’s haul ass!”

Inaba and Kido were already under the opened gate.

Geez, I was so worried I didn’t even notice them taking the lead…!

“They really are the kind to act before thinking, uh. Let’s move on.”

With Jay taking the lead, we entered the castle.

The inside was just as weird as the outside.

The walls were curved and colored messily in many different colors. What a strange decoration. The walls and pillars seem to be intentionally messing up with perspective, so I’m feeling dizzy just by walking around.

“It’s like one of Escher’s[18] trompe-l’œl[19] paintings…” Inaba murmured.

“Who’s Escher?”

Inaba looked at Jay like he was an alien.

“You don’t know who Escher is? He’s a painter who worked with stuff like reversing perspective, staircases that keep going endlessly, and buildings where the floor and the ceiling are connected in all directions.”

“Never heard of ‘im.”

...was what Jay said.

In my mind, I could see those pictures Inaba was describing. I don’t remember ever seeing them, but for some reason I’m sure I know of them.

Those memories… they’re mine, aren’t they?

Because if they aren’t, then whose are they?

After walking through many dizzying corridors, we finally arrived at a great hall.

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[18] M. C. Escher (1898-1972) was a Dutch graphic artist who worked with impossible objects, explorations of infinity, reflection, symmetry, and perspective.

[19] French for “deceive the eye.” An art technique that uses realistic imagery to create the optical illusion that the object exists in three dimensions.

In addition to the door we came from, there were several others on the walls, with an enormous staircase in the middle leading to a big door.

"This looks like the heart of the castle. Judging from how grandiose it is, those two must be at the top of those stairs."

"Maybe. They do say both idiots and smoke like high places."[20]

Following Inaba's advice, we climbed the stairs. I then put my hand on the door.

"Ah, the idiots are here, daddy!" We heard Aki's laughing voice from the inside. "The idiots have arrived, they're here!"

"That brat's a prodigy when it comes to irritating people!" Inaba said, upset.

Beyond the door there was a room much smaller than the big hall.

In the center stood a really tacky chair that looked like a throne. And sitting on it, smiling at us, there was no one other than Takahisa Kandori himself…!

Kandori locked eyes with Kido and his expression changed a little.

"Oh, it seems the pests have increased in number. And they added in you of all people. Why, I thought I had sent you to the limbo between worlds, and yet here you are with no extra scars. You really do have the devil's luck."

"Kandori, you son of a bitch! Let's see if you can talk shit with my fist in your mouth!"

Kido tried to jump at Kandori, but Jay and Inaba held him back.

"Don't jump the gun, Kido!"

"He's right! Kandori owns this place, so he must have a trick up his sleeve. Just look at that ugly smile of his!"

Reluctantly, Kido calmed down.

Kandori slowly stood up from his throne. We readied ourselves, but he seemed unfazed by us.

"There's no need to be so agitated. I'm still thinking of what to do with you."

He then turned to Aki and started petting her head, speaking softly.

"Aki, please be quiet for a little bit, okay?"

"But… oh, okay… I'll do as you say, daddy."

Surprisingly, Aki obeyed him.

"Well then… I supposed I'm grateful to you all. It's thanks to you that I managed to finally get my hands on this."

---

[20] Japanese proverb.

Kandori extended his hand toward us, and in his palm were the two halves of the magic compact, combined into one…!

“I’m extremely satisfied with the fact that I managed to obtain it without having to lift a finger. I’m sincerely grateful to all of you.”

Kandori’s laughter echoed in the room.

At my side, Kido clenched his fists tightly.

“What is it that you desire? What are you going to use that compact for?”

Jay’s words made Kandori suddenly stop laughing.

“You wish to know what I’m going to do? Then as thanks, let me put on one last show for you all. Now, Aki, let’s start!”

“Yes, daddy!”

Aki’s face beamed at Kandori’s order, like merely serving him is enough reason to be happy. She took the compact from his hands and opened it. She looked into the round mirror inside and recited a spell.

“Eruaser Tsymmom! Come out, Chaos Mirror!”

Behind Kandori, a giant mirror more than two meters tall appeared. It was similar to the Mirror of Falsehoods that had corrupted Chisato, but it felt strangely dignified and gave out a powerful aura of intimidation.

“W, what is that…!? What are you planning to do with it!?”

“Close your mouth and watch, Maki Sonomura. The show is about to start, and I’m sure it’ll be enjoyable for you. Now, behold!”

Kandori pointed at the mirror and we looked into it.

“Is that… our city? The one from our world?”

“Looks like it…”

The mirror’s surface was showing a view of Mikage-cho seen from above, from a very high place. The view was familiar to me, but there was no wall cutting the city in half so it seems to be the other Mikage-cho. However, the reflection on the mirror started to sway.

“Eh…?”

At first I thought the mirror was shaking, but that wasn’t it. It was the ground of the Mikage-cho reflected in the mirror that was shaking violently.

And then, right before our eyes, the central part of the city was crushed by some invisible force. The buildings, lamp posts, and… possibly… even the people who lived there were suddenly no more. A vacant lot a few kilometers long.

Eventually, shadows started to appear in the now cleared area. They began to expand in number and size, forming a larger picture…!

At last, they transformed into a dome-shaped building.

“This is my ambition made manifest. I shall christen it as Deva Yuga.”

Kandori said, satisfied.

“Y, you bastard! What do you think you’re doing!?” Jay yelled at him, his body trembling in rage. “Our city… the people who live in it… just who the fuck do you think you are, huh!?”

“Such trivialities are beneath my notice.”

“Cut the crap!”

Behind Jay, a shining green aura started to manifest, the figure of his Deity Persona forming.

“Hehehe. Bark as loud as you want, it doesn’t change the fact that this is your loss. I don’t have the time to spare with you right now… inside the Deva Yuga, I shall become a god.”

Kandori raised a finger and made a signal to Aki, who nodded and once again cast the spell.

“Take us to the Deva Yuga!”

At Aki’s shrill cry, she and Kandori were gone, alongside the Chaos Mirror.

I fell on my knees on the spot.

“T, that’s cruel… so cruel… what has he done!?”

Everyone else seemed just as dumbfounded as I felt.

“Hey, this isn’t the time to feel down!” Kido started yelling.

Surprised, I turned towards him.

“Don’t give him a head start! Let’s follow the bastard right away and kill him already! If we don’t, then who knows how much worse things can get!?”

Kido’s words were like a bucket of water to our faces, me included.

I stood up.

“Let’s go after them… Mai entrusted that compact with me, so I have to get it back!”

We split up and started searching the castle. It was Nanjo's idea, since he figured Kandori must have a way to return to the other world stashed away somewhere, in case of an emergency. It's very plausible, so we decided to look for it.

I was looking near the doors on the hall downstairs when I started to hear a faint noise.

"Hey, can you hear a voice?" I asked Inaba, who was with me.

"A voice? What kind of voice?"

"Look… listen to it. It sounds like someone crying."

Inaba closed his eyes and strained his ears.

"You're right… is it someone else trapped in here?"

The voice appeared to be coming from the door on the farthest end of the hall. We opened the door, and inside it was a staircase leading to the underground, from where the voice echoed from.

"I feel like I've heard this voice before…"

"A friend of yours?"

"I don't know… I can't remember exactly. But I do feel like I know it."

"Well, it'll be dangerous by ourselves so I'll call the other guys. Sonomura, you wait here okay?"

"Okay, I'll wait here."

Inaba left to look for the other guys.

As I waited at the top of the stairs, I heard the sobbing voice again.

Just whose voice is it? Why can't I remember?

After some time passed, I started hearing someone calling my name over the sobs.

"Maaaaakiiiiiiiii… Maaaaaa… kiiiiiii…"

Someone is… calling me?

I went down several steps so I could hear better.

Yes… it's true, I can hear it. Down there, someone is calling me.

As if beckoned, I started going down the steps, completely forgetting about Inaba telling me not to go alone. But for some reason, I was completely sure… that the owner of that voice would never wish me any harm.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a small door.

"Maaaaakiiiiiiiii… where… are you? Maaaaaakiiiiiiiii…"

The voice is certainly coming from the other side of this door.

Gently, I opened it.

The other side of the door looked like a warehouse. There were a bunch of different machines at the back, and the room was illuminated by a single naked light bulb in the center of the ceiling.

There, illuminated by the light bulb's orange light, was a long-haired woman wearing a dress, her back turned to me. As she noticed my presence, the woman slowly turned around.

I gasped.

She clearly wasn't normal...

Two horns sprouted from her forehead amidst reddish brown hair, and her eyes were red and bloodshot. Her mouth span from ear to ear, and a sharp fang peeked from it. For a moment I thought it might be a normal person wearing a *Hannya*[21] mask, but her limbs were purplish red and far too long for a human.

When she saw me, the creature said my name happily in a gentle voice that didn't match its appearance.

"There you are, Maki! I was worried sick looking for you. Now, come to mommy and let's go back home…!"

"M, mommy...?"

"Yes it's me... it's mommy. Why the strange face? Now, come to me…"

Mommy…?

She's calling herself my mother?

Just what is she thinking? There's no way my mother could look like that.

But even so… where is my mother? Who was I born from?

The more I think about it, the more confused I get.

As I was told, I started to slowly walk towards the creature.

"Sonomura you idiot, don't get closer to that! It's a monster!"

Someone called out from behind me, but no one, not even myself, can stop me from walking towards the creature…

It greeted me with both arms outstretched.

"Come to mommy's embrace…"

---

[21] A mask used in Noh theater, representing a female demon. It has two sharp horns, metal eyes and a leering mouth.

The moment I touched her arms… I lost… consciousness…

When I came to, the first thing I saw was the lightbulb on the ceiling. So this is… the same room from before…

“Finally, you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

That was Inaba, who was crouching next to my body. He was looking at me with worry in his eyes.

Slowly, I lifted my body from the ground.

“How long was I out?”

“A few minutes.”

“That… *Hannya* creature that was here… where is it now?”

Inaba pointed his finger at a woman lying on the ground a few meters away. Jay, Nanjo, and Kido were standing next to her.

“It… I mean, *she* is that woman. Both of you fainted at the same time, and the moment you guys made contact a bunch of spark-looking things starting flying. When the light died down, that *Hannya* monster had turned into a person. To top it all, she is your… I mean, she is the mother of our world’s Sonomura! That gave us quite a jump.”

We seemed to have regained consciousness at the same time, and the woman slowly stood up as I listened to Inaba’s explanation.

She looked around in a daze, but when our eyes met her face morphed into surprise.

“Maki, what are you doing here!? I was worried sick when I heard you disappeared from the hospital… oh my God, thank goodness you’re okay…!”

She tried walking towards me, but seemed to get dizzy and fell to the ground.

“No, ma’am, she’s not your daughter Maki. Well, she is her but… ah geez, this is hard to explain. Anyway, she’s a different person.”

Jay’s explanation gave no results, only making the woman stare at me in puzzlement.

“She’s not Maki...? But she looks exactly like her…”

In the end, Nanjo managed to properly explain the situation to the other Maki’s mother in a way that she could understand and she seemed convinced.

“So that’s how it is… now that I think about it, you do look different.” She smiled at me. “Your complexion is much better.”

She looks so... kind.

Maki's mother then addressed the boys.

"After you guys left me at the school, I never left the place. I was resting in the infirmary's bed when… I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes, a very ominous-looking dream. In it, I was looking for Maki in the middle of a thick fog." Her eyes were a bit vacant, as if she was doubting what she had gone through. "She was lost and must have been crying, but no matter where I looked I couldn't find her. I was going mad with worry… and when I came to, I was here. I can't remember anything else… how the hell did I end up here?"

Overall, she looked extremely exhausted. The disappearance of her Maki must have really shaken her up.

After a while, her face cleared up.

"You said you're looking for a way back to the other world so you can go after Kandori, right? If that's the case, I can be of help. I don't know if you've already noticed, but there's a portal to the other world in this very room."

She pointed at the back of the room. There were two identical machines lining up the walls in each side of this room, with the back wall completely empty.

"That's the portal?"

"Yes. It looks like a regular wall, doesn't it? Those two devices are DVA System terminals, so we can open a portal to the other world on that wall by using them."

Maki's mother stood up, this time successfully, and walked over to the machines with wobbly legs. She tinkered with them for a bit before turning around with a confident look.

"We're in luck, everything seems to be in order. I've seen them use it back in the lab, so I know how to operate the machine. You guys can go through here."

"You're telling us to go, but… what about you, ma'am? Will you come with us?"

"Unfortunately, the dimensional passage is currently very unstable. In order for you to reach the other side safely, someone has to stay here to make adjustments on the go. I'll do it, so you kids go on."

"We can't do that!" Kido, who has been silent up until now, spoke up. "We can't just go and leave you behind!"

Maki's mother looked at him with surprise, before her expression turned into a smile.

“Thank you… you’re such a sweet boy, but I’m okay with this. Please, go. I believe in you all, so I’ll be waiting here. Once everything is settled, you can come and get me.”

“I understand. Everyone, we really don’t have the time to spare, so let’s go. Remember Kido, you said it yourself.” Jay told Kido, who was still hesitating.

“Fine…”

We all grouped near the wall as Maki’s mother took her position by the machine’s keyboard. The machine then started to make muffled sounds.

“Please be careful, everyone. You too, Maki…”

I waved to her.

“We’ll come back, I promise! We’ll find the other world’s Maki too…!”

Maki’s mother said something, but unfortunately I couldn’t hear it over the mechanical sounds of the terminal.

And then, we were wrapped in darkness.

Light and sound came back, just as suddenly as they had left.

The place we’re in now is much bigger than that small room in the castle’s basement. It seems to be some kind of… factory, with various machines surrounding us.

“…gh…”

I heard moaning from below so I looked down, and to my surprised the boys were all collapsed on the ground.

“Guys… what happened?”

“Sonomura… you’re not feeling dizzy or... nauseous or something?”

“Not a bit. Did you guys all get motion sickness from crossing to this dimension?”

I looked at them in amazement. Even the tough-looking Kido was as white as a sheet.

“Wow, you guys are a mess. But, uh… should I worry or…”

“No, thanks. I think we’re okay now.” Jay said, slowly getting up and sweeping his gaze across the room. “Anyway, where are we?”

“Weren’t we here before?” Nanjo asked. “I think I remember this place.”

“This is the underground lab of the SEBEC headquarters.” Kido asserted. “The DVA System created by that bastard created is over there.”

Yeah… he’s right.

It feels like it's been ages, but we've been here not too long ago. This is where we came looking for Kandori and then went to my world (or, for everyone else, "the other world").

"I see. But why do you know about this place, Kido?"

"Back then, I snuck inside the SEBEC building by myself so I could strangle that bastard with my own two hands. I was captured and they kicked me inside the DVA System machine as a guinea pig. From what I understand, you guys arrived just after that."

"So we've returned to the starting point. I feel like I'm dancing in circles on his palm…" Nanjo grumbled under his breath.

"Yeah, but for all we know we might be in a helix." Jay said. "So we might be moving in circles, but we're also moving upwards. Let's get a move on."

We walked to the door leading out of this room.

The heavy metal door led into a dark hallway. We formed a line, with Nanjo at the front and me at the back. I think the guys did this on purpose to try and protect me in case something happened, but as a result closing the heavy door was left to me. Gee, thanks.

Sure I could have just left the door open, but the open portal made me feel uneasy. I feel like a monster could pop out of it at any second.

Plus, leaving my back to the entrance of a dark room felt very unpleasant.

The door was very heavy and I was having difficulties pushing it closed when Kido helped me. He was so tall his arms went above my head.

I turned around to thank him, but he was already walking ahead.

"Hey, Kido…?"

I called out to him as I jogged to his side. In response, he slowed his pace down a little and looked at me.

"You really are very tall!"

I was honestly impressed by it, so I told him.

In response, Kido's eyebrows shot up. He stayed quiet for a while so I didn't know if he was ignoring me, angry, or just feeling shy.

"182 cm."[22]

"Huh?"

"I'm 182 cm tall."

[22] Around 5'9.

It took me a while to process what he just said. I then realized he said it in response to my comment and it made me blush a little.

“Ah no, I didn’t mean to ask how tall you are. So, uh… why are you traveling with us, Kido?”

“So that I can take that son of a bitch down with my own hands, duh.”

“Yes, you said that before… but why? I’m going after Kandori so I can save my city. Everyone else is doing it to save their city. For Nanjo… a person who he dearly loved, Yamaoka, died because of Kandori’s plan so he wants Kandori to pay for that. Inaba is looking for this world’s Maki, who went missing also because of this incident. Jay told me that at first he was just going with the flow, but now he’s personally invested because he’s angry at how Kandori disregards other people’s lives. You also have a reason for going after Kandori, don’t you?”

Kido looked at me silently for a while.

I got flustered and resumed talking to fill in the silence.

“You want to tell us that it’s none of our business, don’t you? But it is. We’re all together into this one. I don’t like thinking about it… but we’ve faced many life or death situations up until now, and I’m sure there’ll be more in the future. And at those times, well… I’d like to know what my friends are fighting for. Is that… strange? Am I overthinking things?”

Kido stopped walking. His eyes were as expressionless as ever, but I could tell he was thinking things over.

But before he could say anything, Inaba noticed we had stopped walking and came to us.

“Hey, this isn’t the place to stop and chat!” Inaba said, frustrated. “You’re not housewives gossiping on your way back from grocery shopping!”

I really don’t like how he assumed we were lazing around and came to complain.

“We’re not gossiping! We’re talking about important stuff...!”

“I, important stuff!? W, what important stuff!? Don’t leave me out of it!”

For some reason, Inaba’s face was really red. Is he mad? I don’t think this is worth getting so mad over…

Kido laughed at Inaba, to my surprise.

“It’s nothing you should get worried about… we were just talking about why I’m after Kandori. I…”

He cut himself off, as if choosing what words to say.

I realized Nanjo and Jay had also stopped walking and were walking over to us.

“I’ve hated Kandori… ever since I was born. I’m not talking about Takahisa Kandori specifically, but the Kandori name itself. This hatred was like the reason for my existence… up until this very moment.”

“Ever since you were born? A whole seventeen years...?”

“Yeah.”

Hating a single thing all this time, since the moment he was born… that requires some crazy willpower, I think. I don’t believe I could harbor such dark passions in me for so long.

“But why? Why do you hate the Kandori name so much?”

“It’s the blood. I hate the blood of Kandori that flows through me. I want to escape from the blood of the family that cast aside me and my mother… the same blood that’s inside of me. Well, it wasn’t always like that… as a kid I just ‘hated’ it, but things got worse as I got older and managed to get a better picture of the situation. This is why I loathe him so much, and why I’m traveling with you guys.”

When he finished, Kido started walking, leaving us behind.

“Wait, for real!?” Inaba yelled after him. “You’re related to Kandori? Are you, like, brothers or something!?”

Jay got Inaba in a headlock from behind and covered his mouth with one hand. Nanjo then hit Inaba on the side of his head with his knuckles.

“My bad, what I said was really insensitive! But Nanjo, you didn’t have to hit me that hard!”

“I’m sorry, I thought you lacked nerves in your head due to lack of use, so I didn’t hold myself back.”

“Yeah, if you don’t hit it hard, Inaba’s head won’t feel it at all.”

“Oh, look who’s talking Ji-he-i.”

“Inabaaaa♪, I’m gonna crack your skull in haaalf!”

I left those three to their own devices and sprinted after Kido. His shoulders were shaking in what might be anger, so I was worried.

“Kido?”

I finally reached him and caught a look of his face. My own went quickly from surprise to relief. Kido’s shoulders were shaking because he was trying to stifle his laughter.

As we went up and up through many staircases and elevators, the ambience of the building changed completely. The basement looked like a factory, but the rest of the building seemed like a majestic gothic church.

The high ceiling and the walls were both made of stone with extravagant decorations. There were so many wide corridors and small rooms that it felt more like the inside of a small city instead of a building.

The air was cool and refreshing, and on our way we ran across many people. They all had vacant eyes and didn't seem hostile, but weren't able to hold a conversation. When we tried to talk to them, they only answered with stuff like "judgement time has come!," "Kandori shall bring salvation!," and "all foolish humans deserve to die!" over and over again.

"Just what is going in here? What happened to those people?"

Inaba grumbled, not standing to hear the same speech for the nth time.

"They all sound like brainwashed cult members talking about their leader."

"Just what has Kandori done this time…?"

We were all at a loss since we couldn't get any new info.

I mean, this place is so big that if we continue to look for Kandori blindly without any clues, it could take us days to find him!

But then, we passed by a hall full of elevators. Out of them all, only the central one had its doors open. Plus, it was much bigger than the others and the panel with the buttons had a much more elaborate design than the others.

That was strange. If an elevator is stopped and there's no one inside, don't the doors stay closed? Indeed, all other elevators were closed.

"Something the matter, Sonomura?"

"Yes… that elevator is bothering me…"

As if right on cue, the lights on the elevator flickered. It's like it's telling me "hurry up and come inside."

"Doesn't that elevator seem like it's inviting us…?"

"Yeah, looks like it. What should we do?"

"If anyone here is inviting us somewhere, it has to be Kandori."

"Looks like the bastard wants to settle things once and for all. I say we accept the invitation."

Kido's brief words sprung us to action, and we got in the elevator.

Interlude ～black paradise～

Daddy and I have been living together in the castle for a while now.

He asked me to get the magic compact for him, so I looked for Mai everywhere.

She's a pushover, so I figured I'd just wreck everything and sooner or later she'd come to me and whine about how I should "stop, please." In the end, the stupid puppet and her little friends came here and brought the compact to us. What a bunch of idiots.

Daddy then asked me to create the Chaos Mirror, which he used to create a really big castle in the Real One's world. He called it the Deva Yuga.

We went there together.

Now that I can be with daddy all the time, I'm not lonely anymore. I won't let anyone send me to that dark and cold place! I won't be alone anymore!

But, the puppet and her friends came after us. It's probably that old hag's doing. I captured her and locked her in that basement, but not before turning her into an *oni*[23]. She was supposed to guard the entrance to daddy's dimensional portal, but she must have taught them how to use it instead. I knew I should just have killed her.

Daddy and I watched the puppet and her friends move around the Deva Yuga via monitors. I thought he'd tell me to kill them, but daddy shook his head and just watched in silence.

As soon as we arrived at the Deva Yuga, daddy sent out a brainwashing wave to manipulate everyone in the city. Daddy said he did it to drive all useless people to despair so they could bring their own ruin. I think it would be nice if all useless people were gone. As long as I have daddy, I don't care for anyone else.

Everything was going according to plan, but daddy wasn't happy. On the contrary, he was losing spirit. But when the puppet and her friends showed up on the monitors, he looked somewhat happy.

He even sent the central elevator down! I have no idea what daddy's thinking about.

[23] A kind of ogre or troll from Japanese folklore. They are normally depicted with red or blue skin, horns and wielding a club.

Those idiots arrived at daddy's room, who welcomed them while sitting on his throne. Daddy told them,

"Right now, I have in my hands all the power someone would ever wish for. However, one question remains: and now, what? Humans are not strong enough to love without a goal to strive for. Everyone has those, they're the reason we're so willing to live. But if someone has fulfilled all of their desires, then what to strive for? For those who reached the top of the stairs of life, only an endless emptiness and loneliness wait.

"If that's the case, shouldn't we not climb those stairs at all? That way, one can keep dreaming forever. I climbed these stairs so I could drive this world into despair and destroy it… but everything seems so meaningless now. Is this the burden of a god, I wonder? I brought you here so I could ask you: what are you living for? What is it that motivates you?"

Their answers to daddy's question were all very stupid.

"I… I love myself. I love all the people who live in the city, the city itself… I really love all of them. I think being alive is wonderful."

That was the puppet's answer. I almost exploded in rage. Just what does that puppet know!? Everything and everyone there is fake!

All of the other answers were more or less the same, and as they spoke on and on I couldn't help but yawn.

Finally, the last of them started to speak. It was the one with long bangs that the others called Jay.

"Stop looking down on others. You talk as if you achieved all of that yourself, but that's a lie. The DVA System, this very Deva Yuga… didn't you have others create them for you? You say you've attained godhood, but you're no God at all! You say you hate the world and want to destroy it, but to me you're only lashing out in fear."

Daddy made a scary face.

"Me, scared? What do I have to be scared of?"

"Of everything around you moving on ahead towards the future, that's why you're lashing out. You're just like a kid who realized he's lost the game and knocked over the gameboard. Admit it already."

When Jay finished talking, daddy slowly got up from his chair. He's obviously really angry.

Daddy told me to wait for him in the Real One's room.

There's another room behind daddy's, and the Real One's been sleeping there ever since she was taken from the hospital.

I want to stay with daddy, but I also have to obey him.

I went to the next room and waited there. Soon after, there was a loud noise and bright light shined in from the gaps of the door. After that, there was silence.

Something… something happened to daddy!

I'm… scared… so scared… I haven't felt like this ever since I met daddy…

Will I… will I go back to that dark, cold and lonely place again…?

I'm so scared I can't even think about it…

Real One ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

Kandori finally fell down on his knees, exhausted.

The golden demonic god he had transformed into crumbled, and he returned to his human form.

We all watched it unfold, stunned.

We all spent all our blood, sweat, and tears in this battle and so we were dead tired.

At first, we didn't know if the battle was over and we had won, so for a moment no one said a word. As for me, I was too tired to even speak.

And then, someone started to laugh.

"…?"

I looked at my friends one by one and didn't see any of them laughing, yet I could hear a faint laughing voice.

"Unbelievable…"

It really was unbelievable. The laughter was coming from Kandori's mouth, who was still lying on the floor.

It was then that the others noticed it. Jay walked over to Kandori and looked down on his face, as I timidly approached from the other side. Kandori tried to turn his head towards Jay, but in the end could only move his eyes.

"You were right. My heart… didn't want to accept reality. I was so scared of the future that I turned to destruction. I only noticed it far too late… I had gone too far to go back… maybe the reason I brought you all here and fought you was because I wanted to feel something real at the end of my life…"

Throughout his speech, Kandori's voice was faint and raspy.

Silently and slowly, Kido approached Kandori and crouched down near his head.

"Kandori, do you know who I am?"

Kandori started laughing childishly.

"Ah, the corpse of my past self I left behind. So you too have been searching for me."

"I don't care what you think of me as. Me and my mother didn't simply disappear into thin air. We were thrown away like trash, humiliated… but I'm still alive. All for the sake of

taking revenge on the Kandori family for what they've done to us. But… looking at you right now, I finally have a clear picture of the Kandori family. You lot are not worth hating. You're a bunch of idiots who don't know anything about yourselves or anything at all really… The only things you have are property and influence. Now I finally understand… that you're pitiful."

Kido's tone was extremely cold, like he was vomiting the words out… yet the gaze that looked down on Kandori was extremely sad. I have absolutely no idea the kind of emotions that Kido might be feeling right now, but if I had to take a guess it would be sorrow.

"Kandori, please don't talk around in circles and just tell us." Nanjo, who'd been quiet up until now, spoke up. "Where is the real Maki Sonomura?"

We all stared at him in surprise. What is he talking about?

Kandori started laughing again.

"I see… you figured the truth about that world…"

"Nanjo, what are you talking about?" Jay asked.

"When we first crossed to the other world, we believed it to be a parallel world, but that's not the case. I didn't realize it at first, but as things progressed I started to form a theory. That world is a fictional one, created by Maki Sonomura. I don't know how it got connected to the real world in that fashion, but I'd wager Kandori's DVA System is responsible for that. The creator of that world, the real Maki Sonomura, was taken from the hospital by Kandori and is sleeping somewhere in this world, probably inside this very building."

The room fell in a deadly silence.

W, what… what is he t, talking about?

"You're correct. The DVA System was developed to be a teleporter, allowing instantaneous travel by crossing the dimensional walls. One day, it opened a path to that Paradise, and I visited it with a group of researchers to investigate. Some uncertain elements must have overlapped, but in the end it was all by coincidence. I looked around for that Paradise's power source and found out the secret of its creation… that place was created inside the mind of a girl named Maki Sonomura…

Right now, she's asleep in another room close by. She is completely innocent, so don't condemn her. Unlike me, she can still turn back and start over… Hahaha, how utterly hilarious… I can't believe that the day where I beg for something has arrived, and moreover

I'm begging for another person instead of myself… this is the first and last thing that I ask for, so please…"

His words stopped there. Kandori's eyelids fluttered close, for all eternity.

"No… way… what was that he just said?"

I simply couldn't process what just happened.

No… that's wrong. I understood perfectly what it meant, I just didn't want to.

"Sonomura, breathe."

I slapped Inaba's hand away from my shoulder.

"That was all lies!"

Screaming, I rushed over to the big doors at the back of the room and pushed them open.

It was a dimly lit room with a bed in the center, which was connected to various machines via tubes and cords. On the bed, tucked in under white sheets, a girl slept peacefully.

My mind went blank.

We have… the same face…

"Did you kill daddy!?" Asked a sharp voice.

Aki was glaring at me from the other side of the bed with eyes full of hate.

"How dare you… how dare you kill daddy, you stupid puppet! You're just a doll that Mai created. You don't understand anything, and you have no power! Why did you do that!? Now I'm all alone again. I'll go back to suffering in that dark place all by myself! The only person who could help with her loneliness was daddy! Now, I'm all alone. To hell with all of you… you should all just die!"

Aki made a wish on the magic compact and disappeared.

I'm just… a doll?

Everything in the other world was created by the real Maki sleeping in front of me...? Mai, Aki, the Paradise, the Dark Side, and even I…

The "me" right now is just an avatar of the "real Maki"...?

Then… everything that happened so far, every single thing… was "my" fault?

"Hey, Sonomura…"

It was Jay, slowly walking over to me.

"Get away from me! I, I don't… deserve to be with you all anymore. Everything was… my fault…"

I retreated to the back of the room, trying to escape from them, when my back hit something.

It was… the Chaos Mirror.

I made a wish.

“Take me… take me somewhere far away from here!”

“Sonomura!”

They all called my name, but I can’t go back.

I’m going somewhere far away… a place where I can be alone…

Interlude ～white paradise～

The puppet is crying…

When I made the puppet, I didn't teach her how to cry. In Paradise, there's no need for tears.

Away from my hands, the puppet grew up and learned how to cry by herself.

But those are such sad tears.

I don't know what to do anymore. Kandori is gone, but this world is still collapsing.

Something must have happened to the Real One's heart now that she learned the truth through the puppet.

Her despair is starting to devour this world…

My power is getting weaker and weaker, and right now it's almost zero. I can only pray from the inside of this Lost Forest.

Long ago, when we were in trouble, I prayed for someone to help us, and someone showed up.

That person had warm hands and smelled like flowers. Just who was it?

I was inside the Gingerbread House when someone knocked on the door.

This is weird. No one should have any reason to enter the Lost Forest and look for me.

I opened the door, and the boys who were accompanying the puppet came inside. But… there was a woman with them.

Who's… that? I… know her from somewhere.

She's someone very important… someone who's very dear to me…

We were gazing at each other, and she put her hands on my cheeks. I could feel her warm hands, and she smelled like flowers.

"M, mommy…?"

"Are you… Maki? You're my Maki, aren't you!?"

She hugged me tightly. She is… my mommy.

I buried my face in her arms and started crying.

The memories of mommy that the Real One had sealed away are being freed and filling my chest. This is the first time I've felt so calm and relaxed. Only now do I notice that I had always been alone in Paradise.

"Hmm hmm, for a little kid nothing beats a mother's hug."

"Well, duh. Mothers are the most important people in the world."

"I think you're being a bit extreme, Kido…"

The boys were talking among themselves. I raised my face to address them.

"How did you all get here?"

"Well… a lot of things happened. First of all, we defeated Kandori. Then after that, we learned the truth…"

"Yes… I always knew the truth, but the puppet didn't…"

"Yeah, Sonomura was so shocked she made a wish to the Chaos Mirror that she would disappear… the mirror up and disappeared too. We started talking about what to do when the real Sonomura's condition started to get worse. The monitor of the life support equipment was saying she was in a critical state, so we thought something must be happening to her mental world. If things kept going that way, she'd die.

We were brainstorming a way to go back to this world when we stumbled on one. So, Maki had dropped her compact since she was in such a hurry and then Inaba found it. That compact was empty but we also found a shard of the Chaos Mirror nearby, so we tried to fit the shard inside the compact and luckily it did.

"Then we made a wish, and lo and behold, here we are! Well, not exactly here but we showed up at the entrance of the forest. We found Sonomura's mother there, even though we had left back at Aki's castle. She told us she came to the forest because she thought she heard Maki calling for her. We decided to follow her instincts and thus came here."

The boy with the long bangs explained it thus. The one that the others call Jay.

"The real Maki's life is in danger because Aki is desperate and trying to awaken Pandora..."

"Pandora?"

"Yes. She's the evilest 'me.' If the Real One falls into despair, the worst case scenario will happen… if Pandora wakes up, both this world and the Real One's heart will come to an end. The only one who can prevent that is the puppet… the Ideal Maki. I'm begging you… please, look for the puppet… no, look for Maki."

“Okay. Do you know where she is?”

“She’s crying in the depths of the forest… I can feel it even from here… She’s feeling really hurt and is trying to close herself off… Please, help her out.”

I begged them for help with all my heart.

They went deep into the forest to persuade Maki.

Mommy said “I’ll go with you kids. She is still my daughter” and went with them.

I waited for them here.

I can do nothing more than wait for Maki to be persuaded.

She has to realize that she’s got such splendid real friends by her side.

Unlike the past, the things I make won’t satisfy her heart anymore.

I can only hope that she’ll stop being by herself and return with everyone as soon as possible.

Rebirth ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

Just what am I, really?

Before this incident, I never thought about it. The life in my city was always so peaceful and fun, I never had any reason to ask myself that.

But then this whole mess happened and I was taken to another world… no, to the "real world."

Thanks to that, I experienced, felt, and thought about things I had never before.

I also gained irreplaceable things… friends with whom I could talk about whatever afflicted me.

Many bad things happened, but it was okay. I felt like we could overcome any negative feeling, as long as we were together.

However… all of those were lies.

And my very existence is the worst, most horrible of those lies.

If it's like this, I don't want to know what I really am.

I'm… tired of being hurt. If this is what it means to experience pain, I don't want it anymore.

I'll stay here forever, in the bowels of the Lost Forest.

I'll stay here forever, surrounded by nothing but trees.

No one here will bother themselves with me… right?

If so, I'll stay here alone… forever...

"Sonomura, are you there!? Answer me!"

Who's there…? Someone is calling me…

"Sonomura, is that you!? Please, answer me!"

This was getting on my nerves.

Irritated, I turned towards the direction the chatter was coming from. Standing there were the people who, up until a while ago, I had called my friends.

But… now things are different… we aren't friends anymore…

“Well, ain’t that a nice scowl on your face.” Jay said. “What are you doing here?”

“Leave me alone… don’t talk to me…”

“Maki!”

This time, the one who talked was a woman at the back of the group.

Ah… she is the real Maki Sonomura’s mother, isn’t she? That… would make her my mother too, now that I think about it.

But whatever, I don’t care. This has nothing to do with me anymore…

“They told me everything, Maki! You can’t blame yourself for all of this. When something bad happens, you can always have a fresh start. You still have a chance to turn things around!”

“Be quiet… shut up… I don’t need any chances. I don’t want a fresh start! Even if I try to… I’ll just mess everything up again. From the moment I was created, my very existence was a mistake. Someone like me should just disappear!”

“That’s not true, Sonomura! Everyone was worried about you.”

I covered my ears to block Inaba’s words.

When I did so, someone suddenly grabbed me by my collar. Surprised, I raised my face to meet Jay, who had the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on his face.

“Cut the bullshit and look me in the eyes!”

“J, Jay! You don’t need to be rough with her!” Inaba called from the side.

“If you try turning over a new leaf and you mess up, you try it again. If that still doesn’t work, you keep trying until you get it right!”

“B, but… messing up hurts! If I keep failing, it’ll hurt over and over and I don’t want that… I can’t stand it anymore, I don’t want any more of that!”

“Then let’s fail together… you, me, and everyone else! If we’re knocked down, we can just pick each other up.”

“Why…?”

“Eh?”

“Why… are you telling me all this?”

“We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“He’s right, Sonomura. The past is in the past… you shouldn’t let it control you. What’s important is to keep trying, am I right?”

Inaba was looking at me with his head hung low and a crestfallen face. Yes, now that I think about it, he was always concerned about me whenever anything happened.

“Sonomura, why did you accompany us in this journey, willingly facing so many dangers? You were always talking about how you wanted to protect the things and people that you treasure, that you love. And what now? Are you really okay with them disappearing?”

That was Nanjo from behind me.

He’s always crisp and to the point, that much is obvious to anyone who’s ever interacted with him. He may seem cold and rash sometimes, but now I know that he’s always expressing his true feelings.

“Living with my mom, I’ve come to learn something. When someone thinks they’ve lost everything… that’s when they put their own worth into question and start doubting themselves. That’s a perfectly natural and human reaction.”

A low and strong voice… Kido’s.

At first, I thought he was really scary. But… he’s one of the kindest people I’ve ever met, and he’s always thinking about the best for his mother. Truly, he’s one in a million.

I can feel my cold heart warming little by little.

I thought I had nothing left that was important, that was worth protecting. I thought that everything had slipped between my fingers. But...

“I, I don’t think I’m worth all those kind words…”

“Wow, you’re dumb. If we told you that it’s because we think you’re worth it, duh! If we told you all that stuff, it’s because we wanted to! And get it through your head ‘cause I’m not repeating myself! God, a bunch of dudes our age lined up and saying corny stuff like that? It’s like we stepped right out one of those clichéd old school TV dramas. Talk about embarrassing!”

Jay seemed a bit angry at the end there. He’s always so earnest and down to business, but at the same time he’s very funny and I can’t help but smile.

I can feel the walls of my heart crumbling down.

A tear rolls down my cheek and with it they crumble completely.

“Yes, you’re completely right… Thanks, everyone. I’ll... try again. I can’t let everything be destroyed…!”

I got up from where I was crouching on the ground. I walked to the teary-eyed Maki’s mother and hugged her tightly.

“Mother… I swear I’ll save myself. And then we’ll all go back to the other world… to our home.”

She didn’t say anything in return, only tightening the hug.

The warmth I feel spreading through my body feels extremely nostalgic.

Back at the Gingerbread House, we heard from Mai about the last personality sleeping inside of Maki Sonomura.

“Pandora is… incredibly strong and incredibly evil… She’s not fully awakened yet, but the part of her that is awake has eyes everywhere. Once she completely awakens, I, Maki, and Aki, won’t be able to oppose her. She’ll draw everything into the darkness of the Avidya World. Once that happens, the consciousness of Maki Sonomura will also melt into the darkness and be erased… Aki went to awake Pandora despite knowing very well this would happen. We have to do something before Pandora fully awakens…”

“Got it. Where do we find her?”

“Pandora’s in the Avidya World. The door to the Avidya World can be opened by bringing Maki’s compact to the entrance of the St. Hermelin from Paradise. But you’ll need four of them. The compact held by the real Maki Sonomura, the Puppet Maki’s compact, and finally the magic compact Aki had. Finally, you’ll need the Soul Compact belonging to the real Maki Sonomura’s consciousness.”

“But… how are we supposed to find this Soul Compact? Sure, Maki’s consciousness has it, but we don’t know where to look for it.”

“Philemon can guide you there. I believe you can meet him again if you head to the shrine at the school’s courtyard.”

“Thank you… we’ll be going then.”

And so, we headed to the school in search of Philemon.

We told mom to stay with Mai at the Gingerbread House and that we’d come back for her later. Mai looked completely over the moon at being with mom, smiling widely at her.

According to Mai, the two of us don’t have any memories of mom because the real Maki Sonomura is trying to seal away those memories.

But why would the real Maki do something like that…? I honestly have no idea. It seems my memories aren’t complete yet.

I wonder if I'll regain all the memories once we rescue the real Maki.

But… what's going to happen to "my" consciousness once that happens...?

Just thinking about it makes me anxious. And so, I told myself to stop thinking about it.

The only thing I should be thinking about at this moment is fixing this mess that "we" caused and saving "us" all. And for that, I'll have the help from the friends who stuck with me.

I don't know what will happen afterwards, but I'll never be able to move forward if I let myself be consumed by fear.

Interlude ~desert scenery~

I'm standing alone in the middle of the desert.

The oasis I had found disappeared, alongside that man dressed in black.

I don't want to keep walking alone in this deserted land. Please, no more.

Can't the sand just swallow me and be done with it…?

From as far as I can remember, my body always felt like it was defective.

If possible, I wanted to have played with the other children. I don't even have any memories of doing those obvious kid stuff like running around, going to the pool, or just drinking a can of juice from a vending machine after a day of playing around.

The memories I do have from childhood are of fevers that wouldn't break, suffering, and being scared of the hospital's long white hallways. Even aside from that, I was forbidden from going out so I'd always play alone.

From my earliest memories, my family has always been mommy and I, just the two of us. I'd ask mommy, over and over again, "why don't I have a daddy?" and she'd always answer "I'll tell you when you're older" with a troubled face. I have no idea what she meant by "older," since to this day I still don't know why daddy isn't around.

In any case, daddy not being around meant our family was very small. So when mommy had to leave, I'd be left alone. And mommy wasn't always at home.

The babysitters immediately went home once their time was over, and if I had a seizure when I was alone, I'd have to call either mommy or the hospital and endure the pain all by myself until someone came to help me.

Whenever I was in pain or feeling anxious, I'd chant the magic spell mommy taught me to my compact and call my imaginary friend.

That spell was something my mommy taught me in the past for when I was feeling pain.

"The spell is called Eruaser Tsymmom. If you write it backwards, it becomes 'Mommy's Treasure'. That's because you're my most precious treasure, Maki…"

That's what mommy told me at the time.

Whenever I chanted the spell, my imaginary friend would show up and comfort me.

"It's okay. Mommy is coming home soon. I'll be with you until then, so everything is fine."

My friend would always encourage me like that, and that's what helped me carry on. She'd help me not only when I was hurting, but whenever I was lonely or feeling anxious too.

When I was little, I'd speak of my imaginary friend like she was a real friend, so I'd tell mommy when she came home from work that "a friend came over to play today" or that "I went to pick up flowers with a friend." Mommy was surprised at first, but seemed to quickly realize this "friend" was imaginary and answered "she seems like a good friend," as if that was completely natural.

I believe mommy thought it was less worrisome for me to quietly play with my imaginary friend in my room than risk getting a seizure while playing with real children and hurting myself.

When I got a little older, I learned to distinguish whether a friend was real or imaginary, but even so I was closest to my imaginary friend. I couldn't run around with my real friends, but I could do anything inside my imagination.

During those long, long hours I'd spend bored out of my mind in those sickenly bright hospital rooms, I would use that time to build my own fantasy Paradise.

I'd only think about fun and beautiful things. Occasionally, dark feelings and intrusive thoughts would cross my mind, but I'd methodically remove their influences from my Paradise.

People from the real world would also become characters in my Paradise. In the real world I was extremely shy, but in my imaginary world I was friends with all sorts of people, including the ones who are always the center of attention.

I wasn't being a bother to anyone. I merely created an imaginary world for me alone.

So when did things start going out of control?

That is also something I still don't have the answer to.

Someone messed up my Paradise, and just like when I was a child it was hard to tell the difference between it and the real world.

Because of that, my imaginary world started to move on its own. The intrusive thoughts and dark feelings I'd long thrown away have resurfaced, now in the form of demons and monsters.

The Paradise itself also broke into two, becoming the sad state it is now. Many people from the real world were sent there, where they faced many dangers. I know those people very well, as they also have counterparts in my Paradise.

Thanks to this materialization process, the “me” from Paradise has been with them this entire time. She has begun walking her own path, but the thread that connects us still hasn’t broken. And so, a part of my consciousness, together with the “me” from Paradise, learned things about the inner workings of the Paradise that even I had no idea about.

I also learned that the man dressed in black who would appear in my dreams from time to time was the one to blur the lines between my imaginary world and the real world. Furthermore, another personality I didn’t even know existed has made chaos in the real world and I was helpless to do anything.

Just… how did things end up like this…?

I didn’t do anything

How did me not doing anything lead to such a disaster…?

According to one of my personalities, there’s yet another personality hidden deep in my heart, incredibly evil and powerful. But I’m not to blame for this.

Even if I did move those dark feelings and intrusive thoughts to my subconscious, it’s not like I did all of this on purpose.

As of now, I have no way of doing anything about any of this.

I want to forget everything, stop thinking, and just fall asleep.

I want to be swallowed by the quicksand, become just another grain of sand in this vast desert, and erase my existence.

I don’t even have the power to support “me.”

I should just fall asleep already…

Like this. Amidst the sand.

I don’t want to hear or see anything else.

Yes, let me become one with the sand…

Pandora's Box ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

After leaving the Lost Forest, we made our way through the city and headed for the school.

On our way there, we could clearly see that the town had changed.

When she bid farewell to us, Mai warned us that the town would look different, but I guess seeing is believing as it still surprised us.

A thick fog covers the entire town, and there's no sign of anyone.

"My power is weakening, and so the town is disappearing too. In this side of the town, the only place left that's mostly intact is the school. The Dark Side doesn't exist anymore. Since its ruler, Aki, is no more, it went back to nothingness."

That's what she told us.

We must do something before everything else disappears. And so we arrived at school after cutting our way through the milky-white fog.

The building itself hasn't changed, but just like everywhere else there's no sign of living people. Furthermore, an oppressive gloomy atmosphere permeates the hallways. In the courtyard near the entrance, the small *torii* gate and shrine remained unchanged since our previous visit.

As I was at the head of our group, I passed under the *torii* first.

The next moment, I was so stunned it took me aback.

I was… in a desert.

An endless expanse of sand under a strangely white, bright sky.

No matter in which direction I look, there's nothing but sand as far as my eyes can see.

"What's the meaning of this…? Where's the shrine? The *torii*? Everyone else? Where did they all go…?"

Cautiously, I started walking. The sand made a creaking sound when I stepped on it. I can also see the sand being blown by the wind near the ridges of the dunes.

All the while, I was caught up in a really weird feeling.

I've seen… this landscape before… this is that *déjà vu* thing, right?

Except, I know very well where this *déjà vu* is coming from. This is something the real Maki must have seen at least once. Not with her eyes, but with her heart. The real Maki must be connected to me somehow, or else I wouldn't have these memories of stuff I've never experienced myself.

I set my gaze to the dry horizon. The real Maki's consciousness must be in this desert somewhere… that's what my instincts are telling me. And so I kept moving, trusting my gut feeling.

After a while, I saw something black in the distance. Once I got close enough, I saw that it was human hair. Gasping in surprise, I started running.

There "I" was, half-buried in the sand with only the chest, arms, and head sticking out of the ground. She's looking down and her eyes are closed, but there's no way I'd mistake my face for someone else's…!

"Maki…? Maki! Hang in there! Please, open your eyes!"

As soon as I got close enough, I grabbed her arms and started pulling. At that time, "Maki" opened her eyes slightly.

"Are you… me…? Ah, you're the 'me' from Paradise..."

"Hang in there! I'm gonna pull you back in a jiff!"

"It's useless… I'm already halfway buried in the sand..."

"What the hell are you giving up for!? The world you created is breaking apart! If you don't protect it, it'll all be destroyed. Or are you saying that you *want* it to be destroyed!?"

"That doesn't matter anymore… I wasn't born because I wanted to. My very existence was a mistake. I wish you'd been born instead… that way, my life surely would've been different..."

"Stop whining! It's a little too late for that, don't you think? You're the one who was born, not me. You've done nothing but run away all this time. You ran, ran, and finally reached a dead end! You have nowhere to escape now, so you gotta turn around and face what you were running away from. I won't run away. I won't cover my eyes, nor my ears. Whatever happens now, I'll face it head on and I won't let it knock me down!"

The "real" me opened her eyes fully and stared at me, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she raised the hand that was buried in the sand and opened her closed fist. On her palm was a compact that looked exactly like me.

"Can I… take this with me…?"

The “real” me nodded weakly.

I grabbed the compact, and as soon as I did it, the “real” me started to fade away until she disappeared completely.

I just kept staring at the sand, not knowing what to do now.

“Pandora has awakened. The weak Maki has lost her strength and her consciousness can no longer maintain her form.“

A clear-sounding voice spoke to me. I raised my head, and there stood a person wearing a mask.

“Philemon… Um, what is this desert?”

“This is the place where the souls of all humans are connected… the sea of the collective unconscious.“

“Sea? But this place looks like...”

“The sea of the collective unconscious has no fixed form, as it changes depending on the observer. Some may see it as a warm sea that nurtures life, while others may see it as a violent muddy stream. Maki saw it as a desert of death that swallows all living beings.“

I swept my gaze across the sand once again.

“What a lonely scenery this is… But, you know… there are animals, living beings, in the desert. There’s nowhere in this world without a single ray of hope. Am I right?”

Philemon didn’t answer my question.

“You must hurry. The hour of reckoning approaches by the second.“

Philemon raised one of their long arms overhead, and a gigantic gust of wind began to swallow up all the sand. Instinctively, I raised my arms to cover my face and closed my eyes.

“Sonomuraaa? Where are youuuu?”

That voice was so close to me, I got surprised and jumped back.

“Where did… eh!?”

I was standing right underneath the shrine’s *torii*, just like before. Jay was right in front of me, while everyone else was in a different corner of the courtyard.

“Guys…? Are you looking for something?”

“You dummy. You disappeared into thin air so we were looking for you.”

“Oh, right, my bad.”

“Don’t you ‘my bad’ me. We were worried sick, you know? Wait, what’s that?”

Jay was pointing at the thing in my hand, the grumpiness in his voice changing to surprise.

“I met with the consciousness of the ‘real’ Maki and she gave me this.”

“Is that… the Soul Compact...?”

“Yes. We should hurry. It seems Pandora has already woken up...”

“Got it, ma’am.”

Following Mai’s instructions, we went to the gatepost at the school’s entrance and found three indentations there, where I placed each of the three compacts. When I did, the ground started shaking and rumbling.

At the next moment, the sports ground caved in, turning into a big, deep hole. A small set of stairs appeared, leading us to the big hole and going inside it. Nanjo stared into the abyss so deep one couldn’t see the bottom and muttered,

“It’s like a descent into hell… this doesn’t inspire confidence at all.”

I couldn’t agree more, but we don’t have the luxury to consider that now. We gotta hurry…!

We all got on the staircase, and began our descent to the Avidya World…

Interlude ～hell～

I knew, for a long time, about the many personalities inside the woman known as Maki Sonomura.

Maki created a fake Paradise for herself, covered her own eyes and tried to escape from reality. And she also tried to escape from the dark emotions within herself. However, those dark emotions cannot be thrown away.

No matter how much Maki pretended not to notice, all that anger, hate and resentment towards everything kept on simmering in the depths of her heart.

I know.

Maki doesn't truly believe in Paradise.

True peace can only be achieved by turning all into oblivion. Maki has also realized this by now.

Friendship, love, and compassion hold no power. They're lies, easily blown away by the wind.

The strongest human emotion is anger, followed by hate.

In place of the powerless Maki, I carried on hating everything, being angry at everything, and resenting everything.

Maki's mother truly is an idiot. She thought she could raise a child by herself and went on to give birth to Maki. Maki is victim to her mother's complacency.

That woman didn't ever think about Maki after giving birth to her, and instead she only made Maki lonely and anxious.

And Maki is not only weak of mind, but also of body, which led to everyone casting her aside. In modern society, those who are weak… those who are nothing but burdens, are cast aside.

Those who came with proposals of "friendship" were the worst. They had merely chosen Maki as prey with which to feed their own sense of superiority. They'd show off their own healthy and cheerful lives to Maki by visiting her in the hospital, knowing very well that she was perfectly aware it was something she'd never obtain.

The only person who truly helped poor powerless Maki was the one man called Kandori, who bestowed her the power of darkness so she could trample over those worthless fools.

However, even that single ally was defeated by the hands of the idiots who wield “love” and “friendship.”

But right now, I have the machine left behind by Kandori in my grasp. That machine holds immense power, which when added to my own will let the world fall into the chaos of darkness, and nothing will be able to escape its pull.

That machine is no fairy tale, it truly is the key that will open the gate to Paradise.

The time of my awakening draws near, and with it the time to draw closed the curtains of this foolish world…

Birth ～a memory of "Maki Sonomura"～

At the very bottom of the Avidya World lay a place that was incredibly creepy, cold, and damp. From the far back, a mysterious sound not unlike a heartbeat echoed.

Once we finally reached the end of a long corridor, we found *it* crouching on the ground.

When I first saw *it*, I thought *it* was a big block of stone. I mean, it was so dark I could only see a giant black lump. But *it* started moving as we got closer, as if reacting to the sound of our footsteps.

It began to uncurl its body and slowly raised its head.

When I saw its face, I let out a gasp.

"Is that… is that Pandora…?"

Overall, its body looked like a hornworm. Despite that however, its legs weren't buglike. Instead, innumerable human limbs flanked both sides of its body. The mouth on its head was round and gaping open, multiple fangs encircling the inner circumference. And in the middle, surrounded by those fangs, was a facsimile of a human face, Aki's to be exact.

"Aki's" eyes fluttered open slowly, but her expression didn't change a single bit even after looking at us directly.

"Isn't that... Aki's face in the mouth of that thing…?"

Inaba's voice was really loud, thanks to his surprise.

"Yes… I think Aki must have let herself be swallowed by Pandora. I don't think 'Aki' exists anymore…"

My response, on the other hand, was a mere whisper, as if trying in vain to hide our presence.

The thing's body moved around, "Aki's" face now looking down on us. "Aki's" small lips started moving, but just as I suspected, both its tone and voice were completely different from Aki's.

"I… am Pandora, she who opens the gate to Paradise."

Pandora's enormous body starts crawling, approaching us. As she does, the big machine previously hidden behind her becomes visible to us.

"What's that on the back?"

“Isn’t that the core of the DVA System that disappeared from the SEBEC building?” Nanjo remarked, squinting to see better in the dark.

“That’s correct.” Pandora answered. “That machine is the key I will use to open the gate to the Paradise of darkness. I won’t hand over my precious treasure to anyone, not after all it took me to seize it.”

“Paradise of darkness!? What the hell do you mean by that!?”

“I’ll return everything to the darkness, to the primordial chaos. The power of this machine, combined with my anger and my hatred, shall send this world to its demise...”

“But why…? Why do you want to destroy the world!? That won’t solve anything!”

“This world is filled with pain and deceit. You, the Maki Sonomura from Paradise, couldn’t fathom how much. Hatred… pain… suffering… those things that one can’t escape from in the real world have festered inside of Maki Sonomura. I have taken in all the pain that the weak Maki Sonomura couldn’t, making me the strongest personality. The more hate, the more pain, the more resentment, I become even stronger. Suffering itself is the source of my strength. What’s wrong with using my power to give the world its just desserts?”

Once she finished her speech, Pandora spat some kind of thick mucus at me. I managed to dodge, but the ground where I was standing on melted away, a strong acrid smell in the air.

“Anyone who tries to stop me will be sent into oblivion as well! Each and every one of you will become a sacrifice for my Original Sin...!”

Pandora’s many limbs started moving as she slowly made her way towards us. Everyone except me readied themselves for combat.

“Sacrifice my ass! I ain’t going down, least of all without a fight!” Jay yelled.

“We’re gonna rip you a new one, for Sonomura’s sake and the entire world too!” Inaba added.

When I heard their lines, I gasped.

“S-Stop! Everyone, stop! We can’t fight her!”

My friends froze, looking at me surprised.

“What are you saying, Sonomura…? If we don’t fight, she’ll kill us.”

In response to Nanjo’s remark, I shook my head at him.

“No, that’s wrong. We didn’t come here looking for a fight. We can’t harm Pandora. She’s a facet of Maki Sonomura as well, so if we kill her it’ll be over for Maki as well. Pandora is an important part of her too.”

Jay slowly lowered his weapon.

“Then what are we supposed to do, Sonomura?”

“Well…”

I turned around and faced Pandora. I was half prepared for Pandora to attack at any second, but she stood still, looming over me.

“What do you mean by those words?”

“I… no, *we* have done nothing but push our suffering and negative emotions unto you all this time. I was living happily in a paradise without a care in the world, and all this time you were made to endure all of this pain. I may not have known that at the time, but *we* are to blame for locking you away in here and making you shoulder all of our sins. But please… let’s put an end to all this. You don’t have to take this burden all by yourself, we can all share it. If we don’t, we’ll never be able to move forward.”

Pandora stood stock still, as if pondering what I just said.

After a while, her body began to convulse and dissolve, and from the husk Pandora stepped out, now in the shape of “Maki Sonomura.” We were perfect mirrors of each other, if you ignored the look of pure hatred on her face.

She slowly walked towards me and grabbed my neck with both hands. One of the guys, I don’t know who, called my name, but I immediately answered in a strained voice.

“None of you move a muscle!”

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you and then make everything vanish.”

She started to squeeze my throat without mercy.

“Why won’t you resist…?”

I don’t have enough air to answer verbally, so I shook my head.

Pandora let go of my neck and I crumpled to the ground, coughing uncontrollably.

I then raised my head and looked straight at Pandora. She stood there, looking at me with eyes full of pain.

“I’m sorry…”

My voice was incredibly scratchy, but I still had to say this.

“I’m sorry for abandoning you… I’m sorry you had to suffer alone this entire time… It must’ve been incredibly painful, being all alone… I’m sorry… I’m sorry…”

Slowly, and with difficulty, I stood up. A small shadow of emotion crossed Pandora’s eyes for a split second as she never averted her gaze from me.

“But… I won’t let you be alone anymore. I won’t let anyone push all their burdens into you anymore. We’re in this together… everyone, all of *us*. So please, let’s go home...”

Tears rolled down from Pandora’s eyes.

“I was… so lonely…”

Those words spilled from her mouth in a faint, pained whisper.

I hugged Pandora, and she hugged me back.

As we hugged, our bodies shone with a bright, white light. As the light faded, Pandora’s body began to slowly fade away, disappearing into my chest.

After Pandora was done, I just stood there for a few instants, looking at nothing in particular.

“Sonomura…?”

The reserved voice snapped me back to my senses, and I turned around. My friends stood there, looking at me worried.

“How… did it go?”

I smiled at Jay in response.

“It’s over… it’s all over.”

“What about Pandora?”

“She fused with me and disappeared. She’s inside me now.”

Jay still looked like he had a ton of questions, but I decided to interrupt him and address everyone.

“Everything is finally over. You should all go back to the real world soon, before this world disappears.”

“Disappear? But why? Pandora’s the one who wanted to destroy this world, and she’s gone now!”

“This world doesn’t need to exist anymore... Maki Sonomura doesn’t need an imaginary paradise to cope with life anymore...”

As I said that, the bodies of my friends started becoming transparent.

“Thank all of you, from the bottom of my heart. Inaba, Nanjo, Kido… and Jay. This is goodbye. We’ll never meet again… but please remember me. I won’t forget any of you. *I* won’t exist anymore, but I’m sure those feelings will remain. I’ll never forget you, ever.”

As they continued fading, their mouths moved frantically. I can guess what they’re saying, even though I can’t hear their words.

Eventually, their bodies disappeared. And it was time for my body too, to start slowly fading away…

Oddly enough, I didn’t feel scared, or nervous.

And slowly… my consciousness started moving away...

When I came to, I was floating in a dark space.

I was a mere consciousness without a body, but I could still feel things and move like before.

I could feel a light shining from somewhere, so I turned to face it. And there, I saw the masked figure of Philemon.

“You’ve done amazingly. You started out as a mere puppet, and yet managed to grow so much. Without your help, Maki Sonomura’s mind would’ve broken apart.“

“What... will become of me now?”

“You’ll fuse together with the other personalities and be reborn as a new, unified self. Mai’s purity and innocence, Aki’s hatred, Pandora’s fear and rage... and finally, your courage, kindness, and tolerance. With all of these traits together, Maki Sonomura will become whole and have a fresh start.“

“I have one last question. Tell me, Philemon... what are you?”

“I am a guide, and a mediator. I exist everywhere, and also inside of everyone, including yourself.“

Philemon removed their mask, revealing my own face underneath it.

“Now, let’s go. The others are waiting for you.“

Philemon’s form dissolved into a swarm of white butterflies.

Guided by the butterflies, my consciousness started flying through the dark space…

Goodbye, everyone.

Although, this is not the end, just a new beginning. Maybe we’ll meet again, as “my” new reborn self?

Epilogue

It's been a full year since the incident. Let me tell you what happened since then.

As far as the world is concerned, everything was caused by an accident at the SEBEC building's underground research facility. Branch president Kandori has "died in the accident," so it seems they're wary of pointing fingers and saying he was responsible.

That being said, the main SEBEC branch is handing out monetary compensation for all those who were injured in the incident, but it seems their parent company, the Saeki Group, has filed many lawsuits over whether or not they should pay the money. It seems there's a new news article about it every now and then, but I haven't been paying close attention to it.

The city has mostly returned to how it was before, and people don't talk about the incident. As for physical remnants of what happened, I believe it's just some buildings here and there that are still run down. But they're slowly being rebuilt, and it won't be long until none are left.

As for me, I've been doing much better than before. My health seems to have stabilized so I've been cleared to go back to school. Well, I've been warned to take it easy lest my condition reverts to what it was before and the seizures start up again, but I can paint as much as I want.

Before I knew it, I had made many friends and we hang out sometimes after school. For me, who had little to no experience with the real world before, every is fun and full of new discoveries.

But sometimes, during the nights I can't fall asleep, I remember the friends that aren't around anymore. The ones who, since I was little, supported me as well as thought, acted, and suffered on my behalf. They were my best friends, and even now they're precious to me.

They may be gone, but not completely. The adorable Mai, the mischievous Aki, the hateful and resentful Pandora, as well as the other me who taught me how to be brave. They all live inside my heart.

But to tell you the truth, there's been another person who I've been thinking about ever since the incident… Takahisa Kandori.

If it weren't for him, none of that would've happened, but at the same time I wouldn't be who I am today. I can't think of that incident as a good thing, as it would be a disservice to everyone who was hurt by it. But I believe it was fate that drew us together.

When I told Jay about this, he told me this with a straight face:

"I think that Kandori guy loved you. I'm not talking about romantic love, of course, but I've been thinking about it ever since that time and I can't think of any other explanation."

It came absolutely out of nowhere and made me incredibly flustered.

"Why the hell have you been thinking about it!? Ew, you perv. If you mention that ever again I'll start calling you 'Jihei'!"

I said that in jest, to poke fun at Jay, but thinking about it later… I think he might've hit the bull's-eye.

Kandori and I once shared the same dream in our hearts. Sure it was a dark dream of leading everything to destruction, but it was something we shared and it was a time where I felt joy alongside someone else. He thought no one could understand him, and then he found a companion in my past self.

If we had met under different circumstances, perhaps something other than a shared desire for destruction would've been born between us two…

NOT! Ha! Got you there, didn't I?

All of that is over and done with. Time only moves forward, and what's gone cannot return. If I keep stuck in the past, I'll never be able to face the future with my head held high.

Rather than staying frozen in fear, I'll move on.

Ah, I have to go… Everyone's already waiting at our meeting place.[24]

I hurriedly picked up my jacket and opened the door, the dazzling sunlight greeting me.

From now onward, I'll open any doors in my way, no matter how it is on the outside. Be it cloudy, or enveloped in the darkness of the night.

I'll keep opening doors and running headfirst into the outside world.

My destination will always be my future, where my friends are waiting for me…

END

[24] There's no way of making this clear in the translation, but this part is narrated by the Ideal Maki.